

CHAPTER ONE

On the bridge of the *Phobos*, the new commander surveyed his surroundings carefully. The air was full of tension. Within three minutes the ship was scheduled to exit the wormhole and emerge near the Vegan Star System. The newly redesigned drive system has never been successfully tested. The normal series of unmanned testing prior to committal of humans was waived after four unmanned flights mysteriously ceased functioning following egression. It is hoped with a crew on board any problem which might arise will be dealt with effectively and quickly. Still, this journey was carried out only by volunteers.

"Two minutes ... mark," called out the navigator.

"Display the chrono on the screen," ordered the commander.

"Yes, Sir," came the obedient reply as the countdown was displayed on the main viewing screen. After the display showed one minute remaining, the commander called the propulsion specialist, Jack McCullum.

"McCullum here."

"Looks like the end is near, Jack. What are the odds?"

"Well, Marco, uh, Sir. At this point in time I'd say our chances are the same as they were for the four other ships that attempted exit."

"Oh, thanks a lot," expressed Marco sarcastically. "Can't we do any better than that?"

"Well, we'll find out in forty - five seconds."

Throughout all of the habitat modules the chronos counted off the few remaining seconds. Five, four, three, two, one! Finally, the main viewing screen, which for three weeks had played in super slow motion, sprang to life.

"A.M.U.s realigning themselves," announced the navigator. Cheers erupted as the realization sunk in that they had made it.

"Damage Control? Anything to report?" asked the commander.

"Negative, Commander," was the answer everyone in the Command Module heard.

Marco was ecstatic. We beat it, he thought. But in the back of his mind, he was well aware that the other ships made it too, only to cease transmitting thirty seconds afterwards. However, forty seconds had passed with no indications of anything being wrong. "Well crew," he began, "it looks like we made ..." Marco's transmission was overpowered by a burst of static.

In less than a nanosecond, the entire craft was enveloped by various forms of electromagnetic radiation. Damage control programs struggled to cope with the energetic onslaught which was crashing computers left and right. As the systems were repaired and then promptly disrupted again, Marco could hear the damage control reports coming between bursts.

"Commndo waved...irrepa...cut - off ... soon as .."

It quickly dawned upon Marco the reason why nothing was heard from the other ships upon exit. Their destruction must have been because of the damage caused by exiting the wormhole. Somehow, he had to get word back to Moria that the new drive system worked, but the effects were detrimental to robot supervised missions. If only he could let them know, he thought as he slammed his fist on the armrest.

CHAPTER TWO

"Its been eight days ! I tell you they were destroyed just like the others. You're going to have to redesign those engines again Mario."

"You're wrong Calpruni. Just because their report is two days past doesn't mean you can write them off."

"He's right Cal. We're scanning the area now and we have not found the telltale neutrino emissions associated with the annihilation of a ship. On the other hand, we have the usual radiation emissions that accompanied the others."

"I.e., the fate of the *Phobos* is still indeterminate," put forth Calpruni.

"Right."

"O.K. So how much longer do we wait until we classify the results of the mission?"

"Let's give them four more days."

"I agree. Let's tell Louie about our decision," announced Mario. It was agreed amongst them they would wait four days before writing the ship off. They hoped for a reply before then.

CHAPTER THREE

"It is ready Sir."

Finally, thought Marco. The communications torpedo (commdo) had been repaired. He hoped they had not given up hope back on Moria before it arrives. "Good. Send the torpedo through," he ordered.

"Torpedo away," confirmed Jack.

"How long before Moria receives it?"

"Assuming they're still looking for it, I'd say in three standard days."

"What are the chances the message we encoded will survive the exiting effects?"

"Better than they' d be if we hadn 't taken the precaution of protecting the underlying circuitry and hardening the rest of the system. Given our chances were zero, I' d say the chances are infinitely better now than before."

"You' re so reassuring Jack." The commander broke the conversation and addressed the Navigator. "Dahl, bring us around and proceed to Vega at norm speed."

"Yes, Sir."

When Marco was satisfied the ship was on target and making way, he returned to his quarters to think about the mission.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Axel, there is a small object about three A. U. away, heading this vector and coming fast, " reported the monotone voice of a roboscan.

"What' s the I. F. F. code reported ?"

"Positive I. D. acquired and verified - it' s from the *Phobos*, but the scan reads differently from any other commdo we have. Please stand by, there is a large energy build - up emanating from behind it."

"Please display the data," ordered Axel. When he saw the information, he was at once struck by its similarity to that observed when a ship exits a wormhole. Whatever the commdo was carrying, Axel was sure it was fried. Quickly, he called the recovery section and told them to pick up the now dormant torpedo. Within twenty minutes the torpedo was safely aboard the recovery vessel, and it began to divulge the information programmed in it by Jack. The crew notified Axel of its contents, to his elation. They had nearly given up on the *Phobos*. He had to

notify his superiors of this immediately. Opening a direct line, he ordered the comlink to get him Roalnvoo.

Lee was busy dictating a letter to his wife, when his pocom informed him that Averly wanted him immediately in the command module. He gingerly made his way there and found Axel, Cal, Mario, and Base Commander Willos congregating around the main P. D. S., on which Commander Marco Catis' face was showing.

"Come on and get a closer look Lee, it just started," invited Commander Willos.

Lee walked over and watched the recording with interest.

"...three point one-four days ago. We have concluded that although the drive system works, the effects of exiting wormholes are detrimental to robot supervised missions because of the intense radioactive emissions following egression. It has taken us three days to repair the damage to the C³ arena. The propulsion systems are operative, but we are unable to move faster than norm speed. While the A. M. U. s are operative, they lost their bearing after the emissions and have not regained alignment. Only one repairbot is functioning, the others were fried. Though unbalanced, we are proceeding to the second planet as instructed. After we arrive, we'll set up orbit and attempt to complete repairs. Once done, we'll carry out our survey. By the time you have received this, and we hope we have shielded it enough, we'll be half-way there. I'll send another commdo when we arrive on station as planned. Until then, from the crew of the *Phobos* here are a few tantalizing pictobytes we took during the point - to - point transfer."

Thereafter followed several shots of the damage caused by the emissions. When completed, the P. D. S. went blank and the four stood in silence. Then Mario began to smile and chuckle lightly to himself.

"Well," he began, "at least we know the drive system works."

"True, but what causes the emissions ?" asked Commander Willos.

"I'm not sure, but it looks like it might be that when the ship exits the wormhole there is a tremendous amount of energy left over from the creation of the tube. We hoped the energy would dissipate as one exited, but apparently some of the energy created during formation is drawn in, exiting with the ship and emitted as E. M. R."

"That would explain the delayed effect then, as the energy released fell into the tube and came out shortly before this end of the tube closed," put forth Calpruni.

"Basically, assuming my theory is correct, yes. We'd have to do a scan of emissions to see if they were the same as the ones connected with the operation of the tube, " agreed Mario.

"And don't forget everything would be severely red-shifted," exchanged Cal.

"But how are we going to do it ? There isn't another ship flight ready for six months or more."

"Why use a ship," countered the Commander. "In three days we'll receive one from the crew of the *Phobos*," he said speaking of the commdo. "I know they're the same as what we have in reserve. All we have to do is send a commdo somewhere, record the launch emissions, and compare them to those associated with the exit of a commdo."

"Yeah, I didn't think of that," confessed Calpruni.

"That is why you are the engineer and I am the *Commander*," quipped Willos.

"You know," interrupted Lee, "we don't even need to wait for their reply nor use one of our commdos. Axel recorded the emissions from the torpedo when it came through, so all we have to do is send one out somewhere."

"Actually, we don't even need to do that. If I'm not mistaken, commdos have in-flight recorders. If we played them back they should tell us about the whole phase of flight, thus answering our question without having to spend extra credits on hardware," offered Axel.

"Remind me to give you a promotion Axel, you've really earned it. Mario, how soon before you can get on it?" asked the commander.

"If I start now, I could be done within a half-hour. Once I understand what is going on, I can work on some way of reducing the emissions," he answered.

"Consider yourself in charge then. I expect to hear from you within the hour. The rest of you," he pointed to Lee and Cal, "have the day off."

CHAPTER FIVE

Theseus the XVIII was sitting on his throne, when the *Bearer of Arms* stormed in unannounced and requested an audience with him. Though occupied only with boredom, nonetheless, rules were rules. *Hendriks* was his best friend, and had it not been for his *Staff Bearer* at his side, *Theseus* would have ignored this most unusual behavior. But, if he didn't do as the "law" required he might be scorned. Well, on with the show then, he thought as he prepared to deal out the punishment.

"*Sir Hendriks*, why have you intruded upon this sacred flooring?"

"Oh so Holy one," he begged as he bowed in appropriate manner. "Please forgive me my friend, but I bring exciting news of a new apparition from above."

"Rise and proceed," commanded *Theseus* as he traced the image of the Holy Symbol over *Hendriks'* head.

"My *Lord*, the *Predictor* has failed us again. The *Observer* reports a new star in the sky near *Jorgan*. According to her, its growing brighter and bigger."

"So he failed us again, did he ?" expounded *Theseus* with indignation. "*Eaker Random*, bring me the *Predictor's* head at once!"

The dwarfish *Staff Bearer* snapped to rigid attention and replied with the traditional response, " Your whim is my command." And with that, the stocky man left on his mission.

Theseus' mind returned to the problem at hand. "What does the *Observer* say about this occurrence ?"

"She says its like the four others she's seen earlier, only this ones moving towards us," answered *Hendriks*..

"To *Linnaeus* ?" *Theseus* asked disbelieving.

"That's what she says. And, according to her, at the present rate of growth, it should be as big and bright as *Xanthias* within three days."

As big as *Xanthias*, wondered *Theseus*. What message could the gods be sending now ? He had to find out. "Leave me *Hendriks*. I will address your punishment later. First I must contact my deity and learn more of this."

"Yes, my *Lord*," said *Hendriks* as he turned and left the room.

Satisfied he was alone now that the ever present *Staff Bearer* was gone, *Theseus* began to meditate. But try as he might, he could not contact his deity, Searling. Fine, he thought. You have tested me before and I have emerged victorious. I am ready if you choose to test me again. And then *Theseus* had a disconcerting thought. What if this message, and he had already decided that the new apparition was a message, was meant as a warning. Or, worse yet, meant as

a punishment. What could he have done to deserve the wrath of God ? And what could he do to avert such wrath as it may choose? *Theseus* was confused. Once again he tried to contact Searling. This time, he was receptive to the request.

"What is it my son?" asked Searling.

Oh greatest of the gods, what has thee done to anger thou?

Searling let out a mental laugh. "Thou hast done nothing to anger thee. On the contrary, thou has done such good that I offer you a gift."

A gift ? What form does such gift that comes from the heavens take?

"*Theseus the XVIII*, it is time your people become enlightened. You have paid for your ancestor' s crimes long enough. I have sent you my best emissaries to teach you the proper way of things."

Are we doing something wrong? We do all that you ask of us.

"You do all right. But it is now time for better things." And with that, Searling broke contact.

CHAPTER SIX

"What the Io was that ?" exclaimed the Commander as the ship was struck by something massive.

"Asteroid!" replied an excited Ashford Thornbe. On the diagnostic panel, lights lit hyperactivity.

Marco loaded the damage control program and then asked it' s status.

"We have sustained a hit in the Z - 3, X - 8 propulsion module, exiting through Y - 9, Y - 11. The area is sealed according to program," replied the feminine voice.

"How soon before we can move?"

"The drive system can be made operational within twenty - one standard days, assuming each repairbot works around the clock until then."

What? Did that stupid program say "each" repairbot? Didn't anyone bother to program in the demise of three out of the four 'bots? The Commander was upset, but tried not to show it.

"I would like to bring to your attention that only one repairbot is functioning; and that at a depressed rate," he informed the DamConCom (or known as the damn com).

Within two seconds (a long time for a computer) it gave its reply. "Given the new data, the repairs will take 49 days with human assistance."

"Speaking of humans, when can we rescue those trapped in the aft section?"

"The six surviving humans can be rescued in two days, however, eight of your units are no longer functioning."

Marco slammed his fists on the membrane and lashed out verbally. "Damn it's insensitivity. Thornbe, she's your pet, reprogram it's insensitivity mode, and while you're at it, bring it current on all matters."

"Right away Sir," he said as he "pulled the plug" on the unit and went about the business at hand.

"Dahl, what's our current heading?"

"We were on course for a standard orbit around Second. Because of the collision, we gained some angular momentum in the wrong vector. In other words, we're on a collision course with our intended rendezvous."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Inn's owner surveyed the motley group who were enjoying shelter from the rain. He recognized everyone as being the locals, and this satisfied him. At least they'll only be the usual trouble tonight, he thought as he remembered last night's happenings.

He recalled the two strange men who sat near the door when a black knight from *King Tristan's* Army entered the room. Everyone, including himself, ducked under and behind tables and chairs. He watched with fear as the two men rose to leave, against the wishes of the Knight who took out his broadsword and challenged them. The two laughed and threw a burning nugget onto his dark robe, igniting it. Throwing his robe off, he dropped the sword and displayed a dagger, which he promptly threw at one of the men. He wounded one. The accompanying man, bent on vengeance, pulled out a bottle of clear liquid, lit it, and flung it at the knight, enveloping him in a bright blue flame. While the knight thrashed about trying to put out the flames, the fire-thrower picked up his companion and carried him away. The Innkeeper had brought out a pump and put out the fires the now dead knight had started while rolling around. The Innkeeper looked at the dead body and tried to move it, but it stuck to the floor. It took him several hours to remove all traces of the victim, and he could still in his mind see the burnt body. So when the door opened and in stepped a foreigner, he was obviously concerned.

Ignoring the unfriendly stares of the Innkeeper, she sat alone at a table in the corner of the room. She faced the door, of course. The bartender cautiously walked over to her and asked her if she wanted anything to eat or drink.

"I didn't come here to patronize your Inn, Mack. I only came here for a meeting," she growled.

The Innkeeper was alarmed. That was exactly what one of the men last night had said to him. From the looks of her, it looked like she would be as capable of dealing out such actions as they. He decided against forcibly throwing her out.

"The names *Joenesle*, and we have a rule here - No eat, no seat. So, what are you having?"

Faced with no choice, she acquiesced and ordered some wine. *Joenesle* retreated to the bar and poured a goblet of wine for her. He shorted it, then brought it to her, hand outstretched over the glass. She reached for it and he pulled back on the glass.

"They'll be no trouble in here, you hear?" he asserted.

"Right."

"I'm glad we could come to an understanding. That'll be one silver," he asked for payment.

She felt in her pocket until she had the correct change and paid him. Upon receiving his payment, he let go of the glass and returned to behind the bar, careful to keep an eye on the stranger sitting alone.

Quietly sipping the wine, she reflected on the events that led her here tonight. First, the four events in the sky, and now this one. This one was different. This moved. Being friends with *Sir Hendriks*, she had been telling him daily the new light's progress in the night sky. Unexpectedly, the path had changed and the object seemed to pick up speed. Taken together, those two events frightened her enough to call for a personal meeting. Not that it was unusual. They have had many "personal" encounters over the years. He was the first to make love to her, and

they have continued to long past where others had kids. Before she met him, she was nothing. A product of a victorious invader and her peasant mother, she was an outcast from the start. She knew early in life she would have to rely on herself, so she left home and worked in town as a maid. She even had time to go to school and learn how to farm efficiently. But it was not enough. There was something missing. She was alone. With so much time on her hands, she often spent nights looking at the stars. After a while, the stars became her friends, and they fulfilled all her desires. All but one that is, and *Sir Hendriks* "filled" that one nicely. But that was before *Theseus* Knighted him.

When she was half through with her wine, in he walked, wearing the oddest flower she had ever seen. Stealthily, he sneaked past the Innkeeper and sat next to her.

"Hi *Margie*, what's the news?"

What a let down, she thought. He was all business and no pleasure today. Why if she got her hands on that *Theseus* she'd take his knight away from him, she mused.

"You know the apparition I told you about?" she too became serious.

"Yes."

"Well, its changed course and picked up speed. Its hea.." She stopped mid sentence as she saw the Innkeeper walk briskly towards them, and from the look on his face, he was not happy.

The Innkeeper could not believe it. He put guards outside to make sure he didn't come back. He didn't want trouble tonight, especially after last night. "Look you," he stood imposingly over *Hendriks*, "I don't want you in here, not after last night."

Hendriks knew what to do. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a jewel and gave it to the Innkeeper. "*Theseus the XVIII* gave this to me personally. I think it should pretty well cover the damages I caused last night with that bottle of fire water."

The Innkeeper was taken aback. Never had he seen such beauty. Turning it over and over, he could not formulate the proper response.

"I think thank you is in order, *Joenesle*," suggested *Hendriks*.

The fog cleared and the Innkeeper graciously thanked him and told him he was welcome anytime. Once he had left, the two continued their discussion.

"As I was saying, the object, and I'm sure it is an object, is heading directly at us, or rather you."

"Me?"

"Not exactly. Actually, its aimed almost directly at the *Cathedralis*."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I have looked at it through the artifact and have seen details where there were none before."

Theseus would not like that, thought *Hendriks*. "When will it hit?"

"Looks like in about a day, give or take a few."

"Right," he laughed. "That sounds like something *Predictor Ray* would say. Seriously, when will it be here?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Marco and the crew were in a fatalistic mood. With the repairbot and nineteen engineers working overtime, they had been unable to repair the emergency engines let alone the maneuvering ones. Marco looked across into empty space. Most of the initial damage from the emissions was repaired. If it weren't for that damn asteroid we'd be able to orbit safely around Second, he acknowledged. But no. We couldn't do that. We had to be content with watching ourselves die. No wonder his crew were unruly. Thoughtfully, he turned on his deskcom. It promptly sprang to life. After waiting a few minutes to formulate his words, he began.

"Friends, this should prove to be my last message. We are now eight standard hours from impact with the second planet. We have repaired all initial damage, but we have barely been able to recover from an asteroid impact in the vicinity of the main propulsion module. That's the bad news. The good news is, as my last duty as Commander of the *Phobos*, I would like to take time to list special commendations for the following personnel: Steve Dahl - Navigator. It was he who suggested the idea of retrieving the post-egression pictobytes and using them to plot our vector after exit. He did a superb job of navigating the ship without A. M. U.s."

"Jack McCullum - the finest propulsion specialist around. It is doubtful we would have survived egression had he not redesigned the main engines."

"And finally, to Louie LaSalle, for offering to me the privilege of this command. We couldn't have hoped for a better leader for Earth in '50. I hope you win in '56."

Marco looked out his window at the nearing planet's landscape. A flash of light caught his eye, and he shut the deskcom off and went to the Observation deck for a better look. One of the geophysicists was looking through an imager at the first planet - closest to the star Vega.

"Can I look through that?" asked Marco.

"Sorry, Commander, but we're trying to image as much of the First as we can before we have to load the commdo and send it through."

Marco hated to have to use his authority, but he was sure he'd seen something. "As Commander of this ship, I order you to allow me to use that instrument for a moment."

The man gave him a disgusted look. "O. K., but Wittmar'll be mad if we miss any important geology on First."

Marco guided the instrument to where he thought he had seen something and he increased the resolution to one meter. The S. A. R. image was promptly displayed. They let out a gasp at what was displayed on the Plasma Display Screen. In the middle of the image was a rectangular structure, surrounded by several other structures, aligned with seemingly purpose around the huge central structure. Several walls of some sorts bordered the structures, and there were blurred objects fading into and out of view. "Can you increase the resolution and compress the time more?"

The geologist did so, and they were taken aback by what they saw - two humanoids dueling with each other.

CHAPTER NINE

Sir Eaker Random was growing tired of *Predictor Ray's* behavior. He had been in his hut for nearly an hour, yet all the astrologer had done was give him documents that showed he correctly predicted the coming of the apparition. *Eaker* knew they were doctored. The color of the paper was different, and the ink was illegible, so *Ray* could claim it to be anytime he wanted. He had unsuccessfully tried to persuade *Ray* to see *Theseus*. It was time to use force.

With the astrologer reading one of his entries, *Eaker* quickly drew his short sword and placed it over the man's head. *Ray* looked up and calmly put the book in his lap. With his unseen hand, he grabbed hold of the dagger his book concealed.

"*Sir Eaker*, what is the meaning of this unprovoked usage of force? Why if there were any witnesses around," he continued as he strolled out into the alley with *Eaker* at his side, "I could kill you."

Eaker glanced around and saw no one. "First of all *Ray*, there's no one here but us two. Secondly, I have orders to bring you to *Theseus*. And whose to say I don't chop your head off right now and tell him you tried to run away."

"I see your point," lied the tall man, still clutching his book and dagger. "That being the case, I'll follow you to the *Cathedralis*. I'm sure I'll have better luck with an educated man than with a neilsonian like yourself."

"No I will follow you, that way you don't do anything stupid," corrected *Eaker*.

"By your command," agreed *Ray*. The two began their journey through town. There were many people milling about. Perhaps enough to be useful, thought *Ray*. Then, unexpectedly, a fight broke out over some apples, and people ran to get a good look at the fight. *Ray* saw his chance. He withdrew the dagger and swung around, weapon outstretched. It clipped *Eaker's* midsection knocking him backwards in pain. Noting the dwarf was temporarily out of commission, *Ray* turned and ran as hard as he could.

It took several seconds for *Eaker* to recover, but when he did, he took chase against the fleeing enemy. Being shorter legged, he was easily outdistanced by *Ray*. *Ray* was so comfortable in his lead, that he could afford to make some delaying actions. A horse drawn carriage was trotting towards him. The *Predictor* spotted a nearby snake. He ran, grabbed the snake, and flung it in front of the horse. The horse saw it and bucked, afraid of the snake. The

rider was thrown, and with the decreased weight, the horse shot out and ran full tilt down the street, right at *Eaker*. He barely had the room to evade the charge. Regaining his composure, he searched for his prey.

Ray looked behind him to see his pursuer still in the race. Desperate for escape, *Ray* hopped over a tall fence, only to sprang his ankle upon landing. It hurt very much. Regardless, he had to keep going. Onward he limped, with the wounded *Eaker* closing fast.

Seeing his prey dart down a side street, the *Staff Bearer* remembered a shortcut from his youth. He veered into the local pub, ran through (much to the consternation of the pub owner), and arrived in the alley ahead of his game. Silently, this time he unsheathed his broadsword, ready to pounce on the unknowing victim.

Panting heavily, *Ray* stopped and looked around, not knowing just a few feet around the corner was *Eaker*. Slowly, he strode towards the corner, looking behind him for any signs of his hunter. As he turned around the corner, he was horrified to see the *Staff Bearer*, sword in hand and a grin on his face.

"You dropped this," boomed *Eaker* as he threw the dagger *Ray* used back to him. "Now then. Pick it up and fight like a man so I can chop off your head," he commanded.

Ray kicked the dagger aside. "I think not, for I have learned why you are Sir."

Eaker tied him up, fetched two horses and began the long journey to the *Cathedralis*.

CHAPTER TEN

Marco and the accompanying group were astounded by the fact that life existed on the second planet, let alone life in the humanoid form. While they did not at first believe it, the

evidence from a probe fly-by confirmed the presence of life. The next step for the Commander was to establish contact.

"Hiroshi, I want you to contact the Second," he ordered.

"What did you say?" asked a bewildered Hiro.

"You know damn well what I said, now get me in contact with that planet !"

Hiroshi routinely went about the task of trying to establish contact with the planet. Orders were orders, he thought, even if they were insane. Everyone knew there was no one down there. Well, the poor commanders probably flipped, with the stress and everything, thought Hiroshi. After going through the entire range of frequencies he reported no joy to Marco. This distressed Marco considerably.

"Should I send another probe for a better look ?" asked the technician.

"Do we have any landers operational?" asked Marco.

"Yes Sir, we have two out of the original compliment of five."

"Good. I think we should try another landing on Second," suggested the Commander.

Then the full measure of Hiroshi's last statement was felt by Marco. If fuel were transferred from the probes and landers to the TAV, there might be enough fuel for several trips to and from the planet's surface. This would open the possibility that some might survive. But would it work? Is the fuel compatible? Is there enough time to implement it ? These thoughts and more were on Commander Marco's mind as he gave the order to fuel the TAV. During the fueling process, Marco had the somber task of determining who rode on the first, second, and possibly third trips. But when compiling the list, the computer kept over-ruling him. So he let the computer make the list, which in actuality was the only fair way of doing things. The

computer knew no favoritism and hated no one. It could "stand back" and take an impersonal, logical, and correct choice. After a few minutes, the computer displayed the 27 people who would take the first ride to the planet's surface. Marco's name was first, but he declined the privilege and room was made for someone to go in his place. He declined more out of tradition than for real feelings for his crew. They were all volunteers, so no one would expect any favoritism. But he was the Commander. That made things different. Whoever said the Captain must go down with the ship should have been shot, he remorse as he began to distribute the computer results.

With only three hours remaining before burn-up, the TAV left for the surface, the first of its passengers aboard. Marco watched it leave until it was swallowed by the cloud covered atmosphere. Twelve minutes later, the Transatmospheric vehicle's navcom picked a decent landing site and began its final descent. Through the imager, Marco watched the sleek arrowhead drop rapidly and impact the surface. It was immediately evident to him that something went wrong. People could be seen leaving the craft, as a fire apparently started near the engine compartment. The ground cars moved rapidly away, and the transport flew out the top of the vehicle. A few minutes later, the hasty escapees rendezvoused twenty miles from the wounded ship. BOOM ! The TAV exploded in a brilliant explosion. To the remaining crew on board the *Phobos*, the explosion was too much. Many became angry and began "bouncing off the walls". Some killed themselves.

Marco sadly turned away from the view. Upon expunging his previous hopeful entry, he began anew.

"This is it folks. Twenty - seven of our compliment has successfully been evacuated to the planet. The *Surveyor* was damaged upon landing and apparently the main engines went critical. As you can see by the pictobytes I'm including, an explosion resulted, destroying the ship and the crew's hopes too. Some of the remaining crew have elected to 'depressurize' rather

than slowly fry. One person even outfitted a commdo as a one person rocket. I can only hope she'll make it, though I know she will not. In less than an hour we enter the atmosphere and die. I leave you with one final remark. There is life on Second. No, I don't just mean the survivors, but indigenous as well. I hope you plan a rescue mission soon. Some of the crew are unstable, and who can say what sort of contamination they can do. Of course, we already have contaminated them with fallout, and I'm sure some of our pieces will survive to further complicate the issue. I only have time to load the commdo with this program and of the pictobytes we took of the humanoids we discovered. May the Cosmos affect you positively." And with that, he loaded the commdo and sent it on its way to Moria. It was the last thing of significance that he did.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Theseus was not a happy ruler. *Sir Eaker Random* should have been back yesterday, but he was no where to be found. Nor had he heard from *Sir Hendriks Stone*. *Theseus* felt alone and scared. Earlier in the day, while he was out in the court yard going through his daily religious exercises, he looked up and saw a large ball of flame in the sky break up into smaller balls of flame, with each one trailing brilliant blue streamers. Some of them headed for him. He tried to contact his deity (whom seemed to be getting deaf lately), but to no avail. Quickly, he ran inside the *Cathedralis* and cowered in his secret shelter. Within minutes a loud double clap of thunder accompanied the shaking of his building. Shortly after, he heard the sound of rocks pummeling the roof. For over an hour the rain of hailstone sounding things continued. When it stopped, *Theseus* emerged to see what damage occurred. What greeted him were thousands of burnt pieces resembling obsidian and breccias. Again he tried to contact Searling but it would not answer. There was only one way *Theseus* could explain this strange event. He must have angered the Gods, or so he thought. And *Eaker* and *Hendriks* not showing up only to served to

reinforce his thinking. So when *Hendriks* and a female companion entered his chamber, *Theseus* was elated.

"*Hendriks*, you're alive!"

"Yes, my *Lord*, amazingly we survived the Gods bombardment, having taken shelter under a bridge. Unfortunately, we arrived too late to warn you. The *Observer*," he pointed to his companion at his side.

"I am sorry we are late, for we were detained in *Triersville*," she apologized.

"That is understandable. I hear you predicted the course, but not necessarily the actions of the apparition we no longer see."

"Yes. We were on our way to warn you but we were too late. What have you done to incur such wrath?" she teased to the disbelief of *Sir Hendriks*.

"That is something even I do not know. What puzzles me is earlier Searling had told me of a gift. I can't see how bombarding us with rocks is much of a gift."

"Perhaps the rocks have some holy powers," submitted *Hendriks*.

"But of course. A gift from the heavens, spoken of by Searling. This must be the gifts," hoped *Theseus*. "*Hendriks*, please gather a few of them and bring them to me so I can test their holiness."

"By all means," *Hendriks* replied as he and the *Observer* set about the task of gathering as many rocks as they could.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Axel had been waiting expectantly three days for the scheduled commdo from the *Phobos*. Finally, after much frustration, the roboscan reported an object emerging near where one would expect an commdo from the ship. "What is the I. F. F. code?" he asked routinely yet excitedly.

"Positive I. D. acquired. It is from the *Phobos*."

"Send a recovbot to retrieve it," ordered Axel. "And connect me with Commander Willos and the others at once."

Lee was hungrily reading a letter from his wife, when his pocom informed him he was wanted by Axel Waverly. He paused the letter and granted link with Axel. Axe's joyful face appeared on the screen. Lee starred at him for a few seconds, wondering when he would speak. Lee was not in the mood for any interruptions at this point in time. The homesickness he felt seemed to be growing every day he was away from her. He was upset at not being allowed to pity himself in peace and seclusion. But, nonetheless, Axel was higher in rank for the moment, so he'd better find out what he wants, he thought to himself. "What is it Axel?"

"Lee, I've got good news. We've received the latest commdo from the *Phobos*. We'll be viewing it in eight minutes. If you want a good seat, come quickly. Commander Willos is already here, and Cal is on his way. Hurry."

"On my way," replied Lee. Filled with enthusiasm, he quickly ran to the command module. When he arrived, he found Cal had already taken his seat next to Willos. Lee sat next to Cal, leaving room for Mario. When Mario arrived, Axel began the tape. It was the first time any of them had viewed it.

After Marco Catis' last entry was displayed, the commdo showed the *Phobos* as it entered the atmosphere of Second. Then, as programmed, the screen showed a rear view of what takes place when a commdo enters a tube. Mario was happy to see particles left over from the creation of the wormhole flow into it after collapse. However, confirmation of his theory was not enough to overshadow the events portrayed on the screen. Even though the recording was finished playing, they all stared at the Plasma Display in utter disbelief.

Commander Willos was the first to break the silence.

"Axel, where is the *Sako*?"

"I'm not sure, but I can establish a beam with someone who knows," came the reply.

"Do so. Gentleman," his voice heavy with the burden of responsibility, "what I am about to do has never been done before, and it's politically dangerous. It is the only way I can think of rescuing the survivors. Moria is hereby placed on active duty with the S. D. F., as entrusted by President LaSalle. I now have the authority to order the *Sako* to rendezvous here on an emergency basis. Under the auspices of the Solar Defense Formula, we can use the *Sako* to rescue the survivors. Also, as a secondary mission, we can reach out and communicate with the life on Second. Third, we don't know how long the team can survive on the planet, especially considering they carry no weapons and the natives are obviously armed. We certainly would not want to create an interstellar incident with the first contact we make, would we? That will be the official story of what happened. Axel, you'll need to alter these tapes to corroborate my analysis. No one except for the President himself can learn of the real events. If reality sneaked into the picture, the *Sako* would not be available for another month. This way we can get it now."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Commander of the *Sako* was reviewing the latest construction work that had been completed during the day. As Mars revolved beneath him, he could see the attempts at terraforming it were successful only at the polar ice caps. There was not enough water on Mars to supply the equatorial regions, even though weather machines had been set up to deliver moisture from the poles to the equator. There was even talk of building canals from the poles to the dry mid - section. If only Percival Lowell were alive in a few hundred years from now to see his fabled canals come into existence, thought the *Sako's* commander. Phobos abruptly blocked his view, and he could see the effect of mining the little satellite. It was now little more than a third of it's former size. The *Sako* itself was constructed out of raw materials scavenged from the asteroid. For nearly two years, the ship was parked in orbit around Mars. Now, nearly a half of a year late and three - quarters of a trillion credits over budget, the ship was nearly complete. Soon, Commander Rueben Hickel will guide the massive starship to other star systems, other worlds, and possibly other lifeforms.

Hickel's mood was quickly dissolved by the incessant purr of his deskcom telling him he had a call. He reluctantly connected the beam, and saw Commander Willos' face on the screen. Ruebens grey eyes focused on the older mans features. So, this was the son of a bitchin' Willos, he remembered of his former classmate and nemesis. Seeing Willos' wrinkled face, Reuben got the impression he was a dedicated man, otherwise he would have taken care of the wrinkles. Or was it just that at Pluto no one cared about how they looked, he wondered.

"Commander Willos," he began. "What is so important that you are calling me all of the way from the edge of the solar system?" he inquired.

"How much of the *Sako* is complete?"

"About 80 %. Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"Under the auspices of the S. D. F., I hereby order you to make 'space ready' the *Sako*."

Hickel was taken aback. The S. D. F. meant war, but who would Earth be at war with, he wondered.

"What is the basis for the emergency?" he asked.

"Commander," began Willos, "the *Phobos* was destroyed as it attempted orbit around the second planet in the Vegan Star System. In the last message from Commander Catis, life was found on Second. We believe the lifeforms reported by him may have had something to do with the craft's destruction. Prior to its demise, a lander reached the surface, stranding sixty people. We cannot be sure that no harm has come to them. It is thus that I order you to proceed here at once to facilitate a rescue mission."

"Have you cleared this with the President?" countered Hickel.

"Well, no..."

"When I receive his approval," interrupted Rueben, "I will consider your request. Until then, this conversation and your potentially traitorous act never happened. Hickel out," he quipped as he broke the beam.

Louie LaSalle was a busy man. He hadn't anticipated being President would be harder than unifying the world. But it was. Immediately following the cessation of the arthropod/humanoid wars in what used to be America, the new order spread across the entire North and South American Continents. That was easy enough. The hard part was to get the rest of the

world in on the process of unification. It had taken nearly another war to do so, but that was quickly averted when the "Nostalgics" saw fighters armed with Tosbow circling over their heads. Within two months Louie had successfully fulfilled his life long goal of unifying the Earth. Not only had he accomplished that, but he also made peace with a previously unrepresented form of life - Arthropoda. Once the arthropods were allowed in, the rest of the "lower" lifeforms clamored to get into the Congress. Eventually, the Congress had every species on the planet in its assembly, and the Earth was rapidly experiencing a change back in the way things were being done. The new order necessitated the requirements for more space stations, lunar cities, and even the colonization of Mars. Still, there was not enough room. So he turned to the stars for the solution to the Earth's overcrowding. Yet he was unsuccessful at reaching them. Four out of four attempts made by robot supervised ships "officially" failed. When the human crewed *Phobos* made it successfully, the entire Foundation was delighted. Louie would not only be remembered as the Originator and the first President, but as the best. He is the standard against which all future Presidents will be measured.

But Louie was also bored. He missed the excitement of the early '50s when the struggle climaxed into what is now the right course for Earth. He longed for a chance at a new adventure, and if it wasn't for Merri's persistent support, Louie would have stepped down only last year. This is on his mind when he was informed by his deskcom there was a top priority call for him. Leaning over to connect the comlink, he remarked to himself how everything nowadays seems to be priority one, even calls to ask for a new toilet on Europa.

"President LaSalle. What is it?"

"This is Base Commander Scott Willos of the Moria complex. We have an extremely urgent problem with the *Phobos*," he began.

"Yes, go on."

"Sir, I regret to inform you, the *Phobos* ceases to exist."

"What," Louie could hardly believe his ears.

"It plummeted into V -2 and broke apart upon entry. But that is not the real problem, Sir,"

"No?" he gave a confused glance towards the screen.

"No Sir. There's life on Second. Twenty - seven of the crew escaped prior to the destruction of the craft. But that's not all. There is indigenous life as well. And, its humanoid in form."

Louie displayed a false shock. "You're not serious are you?" he asked cautiously.

"Yes Sir. I hope there is no contamination of the planet. But look at it this way, it's a two way transport. We carry germs they're not used to, just as they carry germs we're not adapted to."

"I will not be responsible for planet - wide plague. Who allowed contact to be made?"

"Commander Marco Catis, and we're not sure contact has been established yet... Besides, he stayed on board when the ship fried."

"He's lucky he died or I'd kill him myself. Didn't he know there is a law against contaminating a planet?" Reviewing everything he heard in the last few seconds, he came upon the only real choice he had. "Commander, I will get the *Sako* space ready for a rescue mission. Of course, it will be the planet that we will be rescuing rather than the crew members. Its time to invoke the S. D. F."

"Yes Sir. And what are my duties?"

"Call Commander Hickel and let him know I'll be calling. I hate to talk to people who are unprepared."

"Yes Sir," replied Willos as he sent warning to Rueben.

Left to himself, Louie looked out the cabin window at the revolving Earth below. It looks so peaceful from here, he thought. Yet only six years ago the war of 2050 was fought, with him as the principal catalyst. A feeling similar to the one he felt just before commencing operations in the opening moments of that battle began to swell inside him.

Yes, he thought. I am ready again, for a new and exciting challenge, just like back in '50. And who else would he chose to accompany him but none other than Merri, whom he immediately contacted through his deskcom. On the screen was displayed the outworldly arachnid and his mental patterns. "Good morning Merri," he began.

"Hi Mr. President. What can I do for you?"

"Guess what," teased Lou.

"I don't know."

"Don't you miss the excitement of the early '50s?"

"Yeah, I suppose so, at least up to the part where I got into the duel with the black widow Weber. My appetite for adventures was quenched after that escapade."

"True, but didn't we fix you afterwards?"

"Yeah, you've got me on that one. Actually, I do miss the thrill of it all," he confessed.

"Well, how would you and a couple of other veterans like to go on a long cruise with me to Vega?"

"Why?" asked Merri, his curiosity peaked.

"Because Merri, I feel there may be much repression there, just as there once was here."

"What can I do about it? I'm not a member of any community there."

"Neither am I, but we did it here, I'm sure we can do it there."

"I don't share your optimism Louie, but its obvious you're troubled by something other than what you're telling me. If its any consolation, you can count this spider in, no matter what the problem."

"Thank you buddy, I knew I could count on you."

Merri sprang off the viewscreen, ending the conversation. After watching him leave, Louie called the Specanner of Congress, Jarri Talea. Wthin seconds, the Indian woman's face peered cautiously from behind a desk, then exploded into full view as she recognized the President.

"What can I do for you Mr. President," she asked eager to help.

"I want to convene an emergency meeting of Congress immediately."

"Why?"

"I am enacting the S. D. F."

"Right away, Sir," she said with a sense of urgency in her voice. She disappeared from view for a while before returning. "Mr. President, its all set. The Third Congress will tele - meet at 1429. Can you give me a clue as to what will be on the agenda?"

"Certainly Jarri. There is life on V-2, and through an accident, some of the crew are stranded on it. Tearle's there, and you know how unstable he is. I hope Paul can counter Tearle's dictatorial tendencies. If not, we may find Second under his control. We need to be prepared for that. To do that, we need force, and the only way force can be brought is by enacting the S.D.F."

"I understand. Well, we'll be waiting for you," she expressed, concerned about the developments at Vega.

Louie leaned back in his chair and pondered the likely reaction of Congress. Al would ask why we didn't arm the ships in the first place, he thought. Baumgarter would ask why Tearle was allowed to go in the first place. On and on he went over each member's possible reactions, thinking of what strategies he should employ to disarm his political enemies. And then there was myself - Paul Jaffrin, the only person on-board the *Phobos* who knew about the true mission of the team. What role will I play on Second. I had served well during the war, and was chosen personally by Louie to lead the contact in a proper way. But that was first to be done from a distance, and only after much orbital scrutiny and private consultations with Louie. How will I react in close quarters with them, and under such time compression. And unsupervised? Louie had little time to think about the matter before his chrono announced he was due at the meeting. Oh well, he thought as he rose and floated through the corridor, better late than never.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

He had observed them for nearly eight hours before reinforcements arrived. While standing guard earlier in the day, he heard a loud whoosing sound and he moved towards the general vicinity to investigate the matter. It was not long before he found some thirty people huddled together around a large metallic structure. Upon observing them, he knew something

was not right, as they wore no armor and were clothed differently. Only Jorganites didn't wear armor, and no one bothers with them because they're Jorganistic, he reflected upon prior knowledge. But they didn't look like typical Jorganites, so he called for backup. Now they were here, it was time to strike. Silently, he passed word to his troops to spread out in an attack formation. When everyone was in place, he struck.

I was organizing a work detail when the attack came. From a full 360 degrees dozens of projectiles sailed towards us. "Inside!" I barked as I dropped the tent I was assembling and ran for the safety of the ground car. The ones near the edge of the perimeter we had set up were not so lucky as to make it inside. One crewman was hit and died quickly. Four others appeared wounded, and as I closed the door, I could see Hiroshi unharmed and running for the door.

As he reached the door and began beating on it, pleading to be let in, I was caught by indecision. Should I open the door and let him in, exposing the interior to fire, or should I let Hiroshi die, sparing the remaining survivors from his probable fate. My indecision, brief that it was, cost him his life before I could open the door. When I again looked out, I saw the natives dressed in Medieval looking clothing. They appeared from the forest and dragged the wounded personnel into the woods. Hi had been my friend, I remorsed. Quickly, I reviewed the events of the last few seconds. After doing so, it was apparent to me that I was at fault. When there is a fault, there is a problem, and when there is a problem, it must be solved. I decided to hold a congress to address the problem.

"Crew," I began. "We have just been attacked by elements of the native population. Their actions show them to be hostile, if not down right aggressive towards us. I think we ought to call a congress and address this problem. Members of Congress, and that means all of you, the first issue I'd like to bring up for discussion is that of the Presidency. I was appointed temporary commander until the second load arrived, which obviously will never happen. Many

of you, I'm sure, feel this means I was not meant to remain in control, and I tend to agree. Once this forum is over, I will give you a chance to elect a new President, should you choose to do so."

"The second topic is that of the recent attack. Although I served in '50 as a major figure, I have no experience on the battlefield. Rather, mine was in the sky and in the minds of the enemy. I would like, therefore, a volunteer to be responsible for the defense of the group. Has anyone had military experience?" I asked.

After a long wait, someone finally rose their hand.

"And who are you?" I asked.

"The names Tearle Durko. I have no experience per se, but I have some from down on the range protecting my stock from rustlerbots."

I knew that was not true, and that in reality he had quite the military experience. But it was on the losing side, and I could understand his not wanting to reveal his inglorious past.

"Good. Your self nomination is up for vote. Well, what'll it be congresspersonnel?" I asked for a vote. I watched as the votes were displayed on the libcom. When the last person was through voting, I announced the results. "The final tally is in. Tearle, you have the confidence of 90 % of the people. I wonder about the 10 % whom did not vote though," I quipped angered by their apathy. Tearle looked quite pleased and began to ask recruits for his new "army".

"Do you have anything you'd like to say Tearle," I asked.

"Just one - what do I do for weapons?"

"Thats a good question, and if you were alert, you'd notice I'd completely avoided that aspect. I assume you've guessed the reason for this?" I countered.

"I fear there are none," he remarked snidely.

"Exactly. You know full well its illegal for a starship to carry weapons, or anything that can be misconstrued to be weapons. So, if I may be sarcastic, *you* have a problem."

"No shit," he expressed, disgusted with the situation.

"I'm glad you understand. Now then, and sort of along the same lines, I have something else we all must address. We may have a problem with the authorities - that of contamination. One: we are here, and that is bad enough; two: we have unexpectedly just made unauthorized contact with the native life; three: And worst of all, the contact was not of a peaceful nature; Four: they dragged away four of our fellow crewmembers. One can only guess at what they will do to them and their *utensils*; Five: there was probably great amounts of fallout from the *Phobos* as it entered the atmosphere. There is a definite possibility the debris is highly radioactive. We have to clean it up and keep it from destroying the ecosystem. This means we'll have to move towards the other side of the continent where she entered and presumably her remains lie. The lander isn't going anywhere. Therefore, we have to move by ground, which increases the chance of further unauthorized contact. That's where Tearle comes in, and I leave with him the responsibility of dealing with it. There, I've said enough. Now let's get on with the process of electing a REAL President. I will leave that to you. I'm going to rest." And I stepped out of view and went to my deci, where Cheryl and I went to sleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It had taken more than eight hours for the debate to end. Much of the delay was caused by the length of time required for the transmissions from other chambers throughout the solar system to arrive at the main Congressional Station, orbiting Earth. Lee was nearly in excommunicato because of Moria's distance. Moria was the farthest outpost occupied by humans, and it takes nearly four hours for a signal to reach there from Earth. Still, he was

required to vote on the issue, and vote he did. The proposal to "rescue" the natives was passed by an overwhelming 94 %. It was decided to ready the *Sako* for flight within two weeks. But that was the easy part. The debate over arming the ship was quickly taken up by the "rapters" and "nectars".

The Compact expressly forbid any transport of weapons on any ship that intends to leave the solar system. Al Severly immediately lobbied for a Compactorial Amendment to allow for such cases in emergencies such as this one. He was hotly opposed by Lulik Sokako. The calm professional manner of assembly soon degraded into a shouting match between the two, and the Specanner had to step in and quiet things down.

"Stop it, both of you!" she screamed.

They immediately ceased upon hearing this most uncharacteristic of outbursts from her.

"Mr. Severly," she began. "Please, in one paragraph or less, explain why we should amend the Compact," she instructed as she tried to establish some order.

Al, knowing he was in full control, stepped up to the C. V. and addressed the Congress as a whole. "My fellow delegates - both present and comlinked, we have a problem on our hands. I feel it is possible that two scenarios could be occurring at this very moment on Second. The first is the possibility some survivors might be in trouble. Remember, we saw the tapes, and its obvious the natives are armed. Therefore, we may need to bring weapons to show our power so they will respect us and allow us to first rescue our crewmen and then to go about the whole matter diplomatically."

Boos erupted from some in the chamber.

"The second is the possibility that the survivors have allowed themselves to be thought of as Gods, and may be able to subvert the population and cause major disruptions of the society,

and possibly the initiation of hostilities towards one another. Remember, Commander Catis said there were some 'unstable' personnel down there. That is why we should amend the Compact - to carry weapons enabling us to deal with whatever is going on there," he finished.

"Thank you Al. Lulik, the Specanner recognizes your turn."

Lulik rose and addressed the Congress.

"Members of Congress, most of you were in attendance when the Compact was first written. I dare say at least 3/4 of you helped write the Compact. You know the spirit and fortitude with which it was written. To amend the Compact with this provision would violate the original intent of it. I foresee a future where if this proposal passes, all of our ships will be armed as a 'defensive' measure. Yet as Al says, there are 'unstable' people out there. How are we to be sure that someone won't use these weapons for their own purposes. And think about this - what if we were approached by some other spacefaring civilization's spacecraft that bristled with weapons? Wouldn't you be wary of their intentions? Think what its like to be on the other side of the sensights. We just fought a destructive war four years ago and I'm not sure all of you know how it feels to be bombed, sprayed, and starved. I ask that this proposal *not* be passed as it is currently written, but that appropriate safeguards be emplaced."

"Thank you Lulik," said the Specanner as cheers spewed forth from the chambers. "You have heard these two debate for quite some time on the issue of arming the ships, as well as their respective summaries. I ask that we now vote on the proposal as written. After casting your vote you may recess until all other votes are in. You may begin now.

That last line took Lee more than four hours to receive. Knowing it will take an equally long time for his vote to be received, he calculated there will be a nine hour recess for those in the Congressional Station. As he was thinking about his decision, he wondered what the delegates were doing during the lull. Then he remembered how it was during the war. When

someone motioned for a recess, it was usually granted. What followed were parties of almost un-believable proportions as they tried to relieve the stress of war. Then, when they came back they were so tanked up they couldn't consciously vote, so it was postponed until a latter date. Things are different now, he thought. More professional.

Lee identified with Lulik's position, and he felt it was the right intent, especially since he knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end of a laser. On the other hand, Al did have a few good points. Who knew what kind of weaponry the natives might have, and who is to say they can be reasoned with. A show of force might be the only thing they understand. He agreed with parts of both arguments, but neither were the answer. So he cast a no vote in the hope that something better would arise - complete with the safeguards that Lulik wanted and the weapons Al wants.

Four hours later, Jarri took her usual seat as Specanner of Congress and made the announcement. "The final tally is in. Al's proposal has been defeated by a nar..." the rest was drowned out by cheers of glee and moans of anger. Then, unexpectedly, the Vice President of the United Earth Foundation floated to the compulater and waited for the Specanner to recognize him.

"Members of the Congress, it is my distinct pleasure to introduce you to the Vice President of the U. E. F., Merri."

"Thank you Jarri," translated the Compulater for everyone to hear. "I have witnessed this debate rage back and forth between Al and Lulik. I would like to see more participation from the rest of you. It appears that many of you don't hold much importance to this proposal because in all likelihood we will go to Vega with weapons - with or without an amendment. Therefore, you can assume that any proposal will do. Then, when it shows it's flaws, you think changing a sentence here or there will alleviate the problem. WRONG! Why do you think the revolt of '50 was so popular? It was because of ineffectual congressmen who failed to address

the problem correctly. This will stop, and it stops now. Whether you realize it or not, the Compact must be amended - and any amendment allowing for the transport and possible usage of weapons will have unforeseen implications for the future of the U. E. F."

"I have just come from a meeting with our President, and we feel we have a viable solution to the problem at hand. Many of you won't like it, but its the only way out. Under the Solar Security Act, we can put a loop on anything that we don't want to be leaked to the public for seventy years. So anything contrary to our stated intentions can be deleted and delayed. Now then, what will be expunged from the Congressional Record?"

"Under the Solar Defense Formula, a State of Emergency can be declared, suspending the articles constricting the solar defense. So, if we declare an emergency, but keep it in a loop, we transport weapons to Vega without anyone knowing of it. Hence our problem is solved."

It took awhile for the full implications to sink in, but once they did, the chambers erupted with cheers and they rose and gave Merri a standing ovation. Merri was obviously pleased by the result and he scampered to his normal location next to the Specanner.

"You have just heard a remarkable proposal from a remarkable arthropod. It is clear to me that you like his recommendations and that that should be the course we will take. There is one final problem - which of you will NOT be going to Vega?" she asked.

No one made any motion to say they were not intent on going.

"It is unanimous. We leave tomorrow," and with that the Third Congress was drawn to a close.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He had been traveling for half of the night before he and his henchman arrived at the brilliantly lit *King Tristan Pytels'* castle. He carried with him four captured prisoners from the newly settled territory he guarded. The potion worked well on all but one, whom he had to club to subdue. He was fearful he had killed her, and he knew what punishment that would bring from Akbred.

Akbred was the chief interrogator for the King. He wanted only alive and alert prisoners. Anything else and he could not get any useful information from them. He arrived at the gatehouse, trepidation rising inside him.

"Halt! Who goes there," shouted a sentry.

He stiffened his back and proudly proclaimed, "It is I, *Sir Cadmus - Hunter for the King.*"

"And who are the other eighteen?"

"They are my henchman and four prisoners for *Akbred.*"

"Very well, you may proceed," granted the guard.

As *Sir Cadmus* trotted past, the sentry bowed appropriately. When the last henchman passed, the guard resumed the position of rest he had held prior to their arrival.

Sir Cadmus was very hungry from all of the traveling he did, and this made him anxious to meet *King Tristan*. So when he battered down the door to the King's reading room (Yes, the King could read), it was not entirely without reason as he was denied entrance.

The King did not see it that way though. "Whats the meaning of this, peasant," he bellowed. "I'll have your head if you don't start talking!"

Cadmus was shocked at himself for not thinking before acting. "I am sorry my *Lord*, I do not know what possessed me to do such an evil act," he laid it on thickly.

"Fear not then my son," comforted *Tristan*. "We shall have you exorcised at once."

"Thank you my *Lord*. I bring four outsiders and news of a new keep being erected by them inside your newly acquired territory."

"Have *Akbred* analyze the prisoners at once," he commanded. "Oh, and your payment is in the room, where they normally are," offered the King.

"Thank you my *Lord*, but I am famished. May I eat something before I accept payment?"

"But of course. How discourteous of me not to offer food before such sport. Follow me and I will show you the dining hall." The King rose from his throne and headed for the door, Sir *Cadmus* and his motely crew following behind. The dining hall had a large table loaded with food, before which all sat at their appropriate seats. After gorging themselves on the food, the King allowed some peasants to eat the scraps. There were plenty of scraps for them, and this made them happy.

Cadmus' dad was a peasant, and he knew what it was like to be fed scraps like a dog. That is why he ordered thirds for himself but did not eat them, instead leaving them to the peasants. After a brief encounter of the unfunny kind with the jester, the King and *Cadmus* got down to business.

"Come *Sir Cadmus*, what is the news about this new keep in my 'yard' ?" asked the alarmed King.

"My *Lord*, I bring news of a new armored keep that came from the skies."

"Describe this keep which you say came from above?"

"I heard a thunderous roar, followed by a sound similar to that which a castle wall makes when breached. I went to investigate and found a blackened armor keep of unusual design. There were many Jorganite people clustered around it, except they weren't the usual Jorganites. I sent for my Henchman and we attacked the invaders and got these four prisoners for *Akbred*. They carried these," he said as he pulled out some exotic looking things and handed them to his King.

After giving them a quick look over, the King came to a strtling conclusion. "These were made nowhere on *Linneaus*," he proclaimed.

"I agree my *Lord*. Their design and materials do not suggest a *Linneatian* origin. Certainly no one in your territory could have made these."

"I agree *Cadmus*," he said as he pondered the possiblities. "What about that heathen, *Theseus*. Could his people have done this?"

"It is possible, my *Lord*, though I doubt they could have built something with no appearant usage," he said as he held a power pack in his hands.

"Let me see that," ordered *Tristan*. He grabbed it and looked at it carefully. His gaze immediately fell upon the U. E. F. symbol emblazing the artifact. "See," he pointed to the symbol of the Earth and Moon, "there is your proof. It was made by that Neislo worshipper *Theseus* that I hate so much."

"But why is it in the hands of the Jorganites?"

"Sure, don't you see," asked the King as he formulated a reason. "It goes like this: *Theseus the XVIII*, as he so proudly proclaims himself, wants to defeat our forces of good. He knows he will loose because good always triumphs over evil in a fair fight. So he infiltrates my Kingdom with his Henchmen and equips them with the standard Jorganiustic symbols - that of *Linneaus* and *Jorgan*, so that he may attack me from within and under complete surprise. He knows I would never attack a Jorganite - no one does as they can never hurt anyone. All in all, a brilliant plan on *Theseus'* part; however, he overlooked one major variable - that I would find out about his plan and burn it with the rest of his silly attempts to convert me."

"Brilliant, my *Lord*," praised *Sir Cadmus*, fearful of agitation should he say anything negative. "So what do we do with these invaders?"

"Kill them," was the terse reply.

"For the *King!*" exclaimed *Cadmus* as he unseathed his sword and rallied his men for the two day journey back to the keep. Yes, he did get his "payment" first though.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ashford Thornbe had a terrible dream. He dreamt he had flown to the second planet in a probe, and that it crashed, leaving them alone on a hostile world. It continued in that he was organized as a work party to set up shelters when all of a sudden he heard a noise from the bushes. Thinking it might be a small edible animal, he went to investigate. The next thing he dreamt was that from behind a large tree a woodsman armed with some ancient weaponry fired at and hit him. Then he dreamt about being on a roller coaster ride for eighteen hours.

Accompanying him was a bad odor, one which continued to permeate his senses, even though he was now awake and the dream was over. When he tried to move, he couldn't, so he

slowly opened his eyes to see why. He was tied to the floor of a damp room, in which hundreds of insects scurried about. He closed his eyes disbelieving and told himself he was still dreaming. Again, he opened his eyes several times before accepting the fact that he was not dreaming. He glanced around the room quickly. The room was constructed of big pegmatitic granites formed into blocks and laid next to and on top of each other, creating a wall. Huge wooden beams covered with mold crisscrossed the ceiling. Before him was a huge metal door that looked like something out of the movies. He heard snoring to his left, and turned his head to see who it was. Vladimir Vitosky was tied and chained in a similar fashion, and he had what appeared to be an arrow of sorts broken and penetrating his right shoulder.

Ashford turned to his right and saw Chloris Nordaft also bound and having an arrow protruding from her left arm. Her clothes were considerably ripped, and with the material being what it is, it must have taken a sharp knife to cut them. Ashford hated to think of what indignity she might have been through.

Further past Chlo, as she was affectionately known, was Aradine Szigat, with, could it be, he wondered grimly. He looked away in disbelief, then looked again to confirm his sight. Aradine also had an arrow in her. But what happened to her head? It looked almost bashed in. Then he remembered the dream he had. Cautiously, he took a sniff of the air, and it confirmed his suspicion. He realized the smell that permeated his dream was the smell of death, and that it was no dream, rather, it was reality. He fought it, but threw up anyway, just to the side of his head.

The noise alerted the guard outside and he peeked in through the bars. Good, thought the guard. The prisoners are awakening. It was time to get *Akbred*. When he arrived, the guard gave his report.

"The second from the left is awake. And by the way, it stinks in there. Shouldn't you wear a mask?"

"Thank you for your concern *Chaben*, but I am really used to the smell. Please open it now." he commanded.

The sentry opened the door and let *Akbred* in. Then he closed it and locked it according to procedure.

Ashford heard voices outside of the door, and wished he had his pocom so he could translate what they were saying. Feeling for his acom, with which he could access his pocom by voice commands, he realized it wasn't around his wrist where it should be. Damn, they must have taken it, he thought. Just then, a short man was let into the room, and he approached Ashford. Asford demanded to be untied.

Akbred was distraught by the prisoner's strange speech. It is the tongue of Neislo, he thought, and only Neilso worshippers knew the language fluently. "All right you Neilso wittness, stop that and speak our language or may your tongue turn to flame," he proclaimed.

Ashford was caught off guard. The language the little man spoke seemed familiar, but he could not understand it. Not having his pocom, he decided upon another avenue of communication - sign language.

Akbred was taken aback again. Not only did the prisoner continue to speak without his tongue burning, but he started making strange hand and finger motions. Oh no, he thought. He's trying to put a spell on me. He quickly took out his holy symbol and flashed it in Ashford's eyes. It had no effect, and he was not getting the information he needed from the captive, so he decided to place him in the state of all knowing. From beneath his robe he pulled out a vial of clear liquid and poured some in a mug, offering it to the prisoner.

Ashford was happy when the man gave what appeared to be water. Upon drinking it, he found the taste to be bland, and his tongue began to tingle. He tried to force it away, but the guy

dumped it down his throat. He began coughing, and soon he was innundated by a spinning sensation. He soon lost consciousness.

While awaiting Ashford's return to consciousness, he noticed the woman to Ashford's right was awakening. "Wake up my dear, we have a busy day for ourselves," he said.

Chloris dizzily became conscious after an exhausting sleep. She tried to turn on her side, but found she was bound, lying on her back. As she became more conscious, she noticed a dull throbbing in her left arm. She opened her eyes and found herself in a dungeon of sorts. Then she noticed the smells. There were two of them, each very powerful, and she recognized both of them. She turned her head to her right and saw Aradine's badly mangled head. She screamed. She heard a loud laugh and looked to her left and saw a short robed man. "Who are you" she asked.

He was taken aback yet again. Not just one, but two spoke the strange language. He walked over to her and unbound her. He could smell the fear boil inside her. "Come my darling, let us clean you up from what that pig *Chaben* and his guards did to you," he made it look like he was comforting her.

Chloris didn't know what to think of the situation. She could not understand what he was saying, but she dismissed her inability to comprehend what he was saying because of the high probability she was in shock. After being untied, she rose and felt a sharp pain in her abdomen. The man motioned for her to follow and she did so, trying to show dignity even though what happened certainly was undignified and downright disgusting. She wanted to bathe, but judging from the look of things, she probably would not get the chance, she thought. She followed him through a maze of corridors, and as she traversed the castle she tried to mentally map the route. Surprisingly, as she walked her arm felt better. Still, the smell of the "gifts" that *Chaben* had given her body were quite pervasive.

After a long walk, they stopped before a wooden door. The man motioned for her to enter, and she did so. Behind her he locked the door, leaving her in the room alone. She cast a glance around and noticed a large wooden tub filled with warm water, and a set of clothes nearby. After waiting a few minutes to be sure she would not be interrupted, she took off her ruined remains of clothing, climbed into the tub and began the task of cleaning her used body.

After an hour the door opened and *Akbred* stepped in. Noticing she was in the robe he left for her, he assumed she was done. He motioned for her to follow and she did so. Again she tried to make a map of the route they were taking. She wondered where she was going. Her question was soon answered. Four guards stood erect before them, and they let the two into a room. On the far side of the room were the pocoms and other stuff they had. *Akbred* picked up an acom and handed it to her. "What is this?" he asked her.

She took the unit and put it on the shelf, exchanging it for her own acom. She then accessed her pocom, and after a long delay, the unit was up and running. Then she entered the compute program and put it in the teach mode. While the processor was running, *Akbred* picked up Aridine's pocom and started fiddling with it, trying to get it to work. When nothing happened he flung it against a wall, and it broke into many small fragments.

With the pocom now ready, she instructed it to translate what was being said. *Akbred* turned to one of the guards and told him he was leaving for awhile. Then he left. The pocom caught only a little of the conversation, but it was enough to get her started. She inputted into the computer that she wanted to ask the guard where the man went. The pocket computer did a lousy job of translating her instructions but it was good enough to get the guard's attention verbally. One guard asked the others if they had said anything, but none of them had. The pocom dutifully updated its dictionary and announced to Chloris what was said.

"What does speak you?" it voiced.

Putting the acom in the audible access mode, she told it to tell them she wanted to know where the little man went to. A short time later the pocom spit out her reply in the native's language. The sentry was surprised and he told the others to get *Akbred*. When he arrived, he found the guard and her carrying on a conversation.

"What is the meaning of this blasphemy?" he scolded the guard.

"She speaks," he explained, "but not by her own tongue - rather by that," he said pointing to her pocom.

"What is that?" he asked. A few seconds later the question was repeated in her language. Then she answered and the reply was spoken by the box.

"What does it do?" he asked upon hearing the answer.

"It allows me to speak with you," she answered.

"Why can you not speak standard?" he asked quizzically.

"Because I am not from this planet?" she answered.

"What is a life sphere," asked *Akbred* confused.

"Basically, a planet is a large sphere that you and I am standing on. It is the ground you walk on, the seas you sail, and the air you fly, ...uh, breathe," she corrected herself.

You said *Linneaus* is a sphere. Surely you know it is not, unless you are a follower of that heretic *Nagas*. If it were a sphere we'd all fall off," he countered.

"Not if we were on top," she offered quickly.

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that," he conceded. "What are you doing in *King Tristan's* territory?" he asked trying to regain the initiative.

Chloris remained silent as she formulated her answer. "We were lost and we didn't know where to land- set up camp, that is, so we chose the first place we found. We did not know it was claimed by anyone."

"All land on *Linneaus* is claimed. Did *Theseus* send you?"

"Who?"

"*Saint Theseus*. He is a 'king' about six days travel from here. He calls himself a priest, but he worships *Neilso*. *King Tristan* and his ancestors have been fighting him for the last 16 generations."

"Why have they been fighting for so long?" she asked.

"I think I believe you now. You must be from a different place. Everyone - even the Jorganites - know of the wars."

"You did not answer my question," she continued.

"A long time ago *Lord Tristan Pytel* and *Theseus I* were allied together against a common enemy to the north. *Lord Tristan* instructed *Theseus* to attack and engage the *Evil Empire* while *Tristan* mobilized his forces for the final attack. It would take him six months to prepare his attack, so *Theseus* would take the brunt of the battle. After a brief skirmish between the *Evil Empire* and *Theseus' Fiefdom - the A. N. A.*, a stalemate permeated the battle. There were no further battles between the two, and *Lord Tristan* learned of a treaty signed by the two. *Sir Tristan* became suspicious of that acolyte and made a treaty with a keep to the east of *Theseus*. One month later, *Theseus* attacked our ally. Our *Lord* was outraged and immediately drew up plans to attack the *Evil Empire* himself, with the invasion of the *A. N. A.* as a convenient cover. Three months later he invaded, and, to his surprise, when he raided the

keep, he found the treaty between *Theseus* and the evil ones. They have been fighting ever since."

"What happened to the ally to the east?"

"Its pretty strange, but our history only tells us of the lead up to the conflict, the destruction of *Theseus'* territory, and a contorted vision of a pursuit of *Theseus*. It is as if there is nothing else than the continuing war with *Theseus*."

There was a long silence. Given the chance, Chloris changed the subject. "Why were we captured and held prisoner?" she asked.

"That my dear, is easy to explain as you will see for yourself. Follow me and I will take you to the dungeon. The potion should be taking its desired effect right about now."

"What effect?" she asked worried.

"You'll see."

Chloris followed him through the maze until they arrived at the room where she was held. *Akbred* opened the door and pushed her in and tied her to her holdings.

She struggled, but was in no position to do much about it. *Akbred* then untied Ashford, and led him to the room where their personal stuff were. Then he handed him the equipment, telling him to make it talk. Knowing he had to speak first, he started rambling about how fortunate Ashford was to be alive. Finally, he was told to shut up. This was not the thing to tell a man whose horse is tied to the branch you are hanging from.

"Who are you," asked *Akbred*.

"I am Ashford Thornbe, astrophysicist aboard the Phobos. My security number is 828 - 467 - 2290 - 01. I am 57 years old. I was born in Winchester England.."

"What are you doing here?" interrupted *Akbred*.

"We crashed trying to land in a safe environ."

"Who sent you," he queried frustrated.

"President LaSalle."

"Who is this King LaSalle?"

"He is the founder and President of the United Earth Foundation."

Akbred was growing tired of such nonsense. "Who is your *Lord* - your God?"

"We have no Lord."

What blasphemy, thought *Akbred*. *Tristan* was not going to like it when he reported that a bunch of heretics invaded his land. "Don't you have a God, someone who created you, who rules your life, who protects you and controls everything?"

"There has been no such word in the Official Lexicon since the A - Morale uprising of '38."

More blubbering, thought *Akbred*. Well, we'll just have to let the guards take care of you. He called *Chaben* and his guards, told them what to do, and he locked the five of them in with Ashford.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I lie snuggling my wife while awaiting my fate. The Congress seemed to be taking a very long time to make up their decision about me. Finally, my pocom alerted me that a decision had been made.

"Paul, it is the majority's decision that you should be retained as Commander of this expedition."

I was relieved, and Cheryl sensed this as she hugged me lovingly. Still, I was sorry about Hiroshi, but I had punished myself enough. "Thank you Specanner - pro tempe. I'm glad the Congress felt it in their hearts to keep me as their leader. What did we decide about the contamination issue?" I asked concerned.

"We have decided the contamination was not our fault, that due to extenuating circumstances we were unable to prevent the acquisition by the natives of as yet un-quantized technology. Also, they have made an overt and hostile first contact. It is our hope that there is a future time and place where we shall be able to make contact proper. We feel, however, that staying here is an invitation to further aggression by the group that attacked us earlier, so we should move to a safer location."

"Where are the possible sites we should move to, assuming you've researched this," I asked.

"But of course. We took data from the first recon probe and 'stretched' them, increasing the resolution and contrast of the pictobytes. We think we've found a suitable location that is currently inhabited. Its about four standard days from here, and it looks like an excellent prospect for repairing the ground cars we have and for setting camp until we make contact proper."

"I suppose you've worked out how we're going to get the cars to the new location," I hoped.

"But of course. I wouldn't have said anything unless we hadn't already done a design study of the problem. We plan on using fuel that is still on board the lander for the Tav, and using it to fly the cars to the site."

"O. K., I'll bite. The lander uses different fuel than the Tav. How are you going to make it work?"

"I'm glad you asked that," she said as she was obviously prepared. "We think we can reprogram the engine to use the higher energy fuel, much like adjusting the air/ fuel mixture when changing altitudes rapidly."

"Sounds fine to me, but won't that eventually burn out the engine?"

"True, but its not as if we're going to use this thing for a year or anything like that," she expressed.

"O. K., now can you guess the next question on my mind," I hinted to her by making a fist with my left hand.

"Of course - the probe," she correctly deduced. "We decided to leave that to you," she smiled.

"You people are SO generous," I exclaimed. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Sure - you could always bury it!"

"Right!" I laughed. "Nothing like having another T. M. I. in thirty years or so," I remarked.

"So it wasn't such a good idea. Anyway, Tearle says we should move soon before they attack again."

"I agree. I want us prepared to move as soon as I figure a way of dealing with the probe."

"Yes Sir," was her reply.

"Good. We will be in our cabin if you need me," I said with a wink in my wife's direction. "And please, don't need me," I said with a smirk.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It had taken nearly three weeks for the Congress to prepare for the *Sako's* flight. It finally arrived at the Moria station on November 23, 2056. On board were most of the old familiars who were still alive (many had died during the six years between the war and now). Rueben Hickel was Commander of the ship. Louie was commander of the overall mission. Merri stayed behind to fill in as President while Louie was gone. Gernessy was there to save "our newly found repressed brothers far away". Lee was there to provide intelligence data on the crew of the *Phobos*. Al was there to provide a military background to deal with anything that might arise.

It was decided during the trip what would be done with the survivors from the other ship. It entailed questioning them and then dishing out whatever punishment was deemed appropriate. While this was in debate, the engineers modified the "Sako" to decrease the amount of time the hole was open. It was hoped this would reduce the amount of matter falling into it, as there was a direct relationship between time and amount, so the overall effects would be diminished. Al, with Merri's "emergency loop" helping him, had made his point. A modified version of his amendment passed, allowing the *Sako* to carry weapons. As the ship was originally designed for colonization, there was ample room for people and cargo, though the designers had not originally intended for the vehicle to carry weapons. And the final provision of the amendment was that after the survivors were picked up and contact was made proper, then preparations could begin toward making the planet totally unified - not just humanoids, but all of the indigenous life forms there. Yes, the *Sako* was prepared for anything.

CHAPTER TWENTY

As I lay next to my sleeping wife, I began dreaming of my possible future, and of my rescue. Oh, I am certain I will be rescued. And afterwards, they will want to create a new order here. The strange thing was, in my dream I was on the rescuing ship. When I (the one in the dream) arrived in orbit to rescue me (boy, this is a weird dream), I found the natives spoke perfect standard, and that we had no trouble winning them over and establishing a new order. I foresaw a problem with the other life - forms though. What if they could not converse in the same tongue as our insects, birds, and other species. I saw Merri, whom I dreamt would be the leader of this front, killed because the native insects thought he was an invading tribe or a strange mutation, in which case they would go to extremes to see Merri eradicated before he could take control. This in effect, would leave the humanoids in a dictatorial control over the natural resources of the planet. This distressed me enough to awaken me from my dream. When I awoke, I accidentally awoke Cheryl. As I strained my eyes to see in the dark, I could see her getting out of bed, heading for wherever.

"Cheryl," I weakly called as I was still semi-asleep.

"Huh? Oh, hi dear," she sighed.

"Honey, I don't mean to make an issue out of it," and I paused awhile to formulate my words, "but you're not wearing any clothes. Even though there was an A - moral uprising in '38, that doesn't mean you can walk the halls at.." I glanced at my watch, "0330 in the morning like we do at home on Mars."

"Oh, that's right. We're not at home are we. I thought the gravity seemed more here," she said sarcastically.

I sat up in bed and pushed off the covers where she had lain moments ago. "Come on honey, lets go back to sleep," I offered hopeful.

"That's fine with me, but if my memory serves me right, you were the one who awakened me," she stated as she slowly came back.

"Well, I guess so," I played the game out.

"Yes you did," she said as she crawled in with me.

"Now perhaps.." I never finished my sentence, as just then I remembered my last conversation with Louie, before we left on this trip. I could still see him standing before me, that imposing figure would make anyone who did not know him think he was unapproachable. A few lucky people actually saw into him and realized he was like everyone else. It was made apparent to me as the conversation progressed.

"So what are you going to do with Joseph Jaffrin?" he asked concerned.

"Cheryl's relatives are going to take care of him while we're away. If anything happens preventing our return, they'll be good for him."

"How's Cheryl taking it?"

"She adores Joseph, and it was hard to convince her not to take him with us. But I'm sure she'll manage. Besides, from what I gather, she kinda wants another one too," I confessed.

"Have you talked about having another child?"

"We've teased each other about it during the night, but I haven't really taken it seriously."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Joseph is only one and a half years old. I don't think I could handle two youngsters at once right now."

"What about Cheryl?"

"I really think she wants another. She's been dropping hints here and there, especially when we're in a position to do something about it, if you know what I mean," I confessed.

"Yeah, I sure do," he chuckled.

"What about you? Have you considered remarrying?" I asked aware I was treading on unfamiliar territory.

"Yeah, but that's about the extent of it. It's hard to get over something like that - you know - ordering an attack when you know your wife is right there."

"It must have been rough," I empathized.

I was met with silence.

"Have you looked for anyone else?"

"Yeah, but everyone I'm interested in reminds me of Dayle. And things are not the same as they were with her. I guess I want things to be like they were," he professed dismally.

"You have to let Dayle go - after all, its been six years since she died."

"The situation was different between us, but you wouldn't know that, us having known each other for four years, and only the last two as friends. But heh, that's a different matter altogether. Why don't you ask Lee? I'm sure he can tell you all you want to know," he said as he closed his eyes.

Cheryl's calling beckoned me back to reality.

"What's wrong?" she pried.

"I just had a bad dream, that's all. Now go back to sleep or I'll have to do something I may regret nine months from now," I kidded.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe another kid would do us just fine," she teased as she wrapped her arms around me and forced me deeper into bed.

"Oh well, what the hell," I exclaimed as I gladly "went for it".

"Wake up Paul... WAKE UP!" screeched my housebot. "Wake up you bleepity bleep bleep!" Little Pete was angry. I had not once awoke when I programmed him to awaken me, and it always had to eject me out of bed. However, Cheryl was too close (basically on top of me) for it to eject me without ejecting her as well. The housebot was racked with indecision. As the minutes passed without little Pete doing anything, the wake up program slowly fried itself out of existence. Since I hadn't programmed Pete to deal with the contingency it now faced (a slight oversight on my account), it was torn between ejecting me out of bed and causing probable harm to Cheryl, or not ejecting me, which is what it was instructed to do. As the system crashed, a warning alarm went off, much to the behest of Cheryl and I.

"What's the matter with it" she asked frightened.

"It's just his way of asking for help," I answered as I climbed out of bed and pushed the override button to stop the alarm and the action it was taking. I then reset the memory drive.

The housebot, upon seeing I was now awake flashed an expression of joy across its face.

"What was wrong?" I asked.

"I tried to wake you like you programmed me to, but you wouldn't wake up. As per your instructions, I was going to eject you, but with Cheryl on top and in the position she was in, there was a ninety percent chance she would land on her back and sustain head injuries which could be potentially serious. So I could not eject you. But if I didn't eject you, you would not be awakened, so I went into a loop, which the protection system tried to alleviate by crunching the disk," it answered.

"Would the crunching of the disk prevent harm to you?" I asked unknowing of the answer.

"Yes, because with the wake - up program down I would not have to respond to the conflict, hence it would be solved.

"What would you have done afterwards?"

"I would have awaited further instructions."

"Oh well, I hope this won't happen again 'lil Pete. You may now resume your other duties," I dismissed him.

I turned to my wife and looked for any signs that she wanted to remain awake - there were none. I kissed her good morning and left to shower before continuing our trek to our new destination.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Cadmus, thirty archers, twelve catapults, seventy pike men, thirty swordsmen and two knights prepared nearly ninety days for the coming attack on the "invaders". Now they were ready, and the area where the four prisoners were taken was now surrounded. When *Xanthias*

reached zenith, *Cadmus* ordered the attack to commence. The catapults were let loose to pre-bombard the general attack area. Then the archers advanced to the edge of the woods, bows at the ready. Expecting to find a stunned and wounded enemy running in panic, the Knights charged into the open field where the craft had been. As they reached the clearing, they stopped out of sheer confusion. The "keep" and its inhabitants had vanished. There was not even a trace or hint that people had once been there. When the pike men arrived, they too were dumbfounded. Finally, after long moments of silence, one of the knights spoke up.

"*Cadmus*, are you sure this is the place? It doesn't look like anyone ever lived here."

Sir Cadmus did not know what to say in response. "I swear they were here only thirteen weeks ago - and there was a keep in the middle of this clearing," he pointed to the spot with the corroboration of his henchman.

"Well, now what?"

"They must have moved. They couldn't have gotten far," he said more out of hope than conviction. "Search the area!"

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

"*Theseus*, my *Lord*, come quick. *Sir Hendriks* has taken ill," shouted *Sir Eaker*.

"Of course, of course," followed *Theseus*.

Arriving in *Sir Hendriks'* room, he found him lying in bed, covered with blankets. His face looked deathly white, and there were numerous burst blisters inundating his face, neck, and hands. Upon seeing his *Lord*, he tried to rise, but slumped back and gave a feeble cough.

"What is wrong with him?" *Theseus* whispered to the doctor.

The doctor pulled him from *Hendriks* before speaking.

"He is going to die," he said gently.

Theseus could not believe his ears. Pulling the doctor closer, he whispered softly.

"*Scott*, you can't be serious. He was healthy only a few weeks ago."

"I cannot explain it. I haven't seen anyone with symptoms as he currently has. The only thing I can do for him is to make him comfortable."

Theseus would not accept his opinion. "Scott, why don't you bring *Levan* here so he can do his thing for *Hendriks*?"

"Of course, my *Lord*," he left to fetch the exorcist.

Theseus turned towards *Hendriks*. He could hardly bear to look at him. "How do you feel *Sir Stone*?"

"I ... feel pain...all over," he struggled to answer.

"When did you first notice you were sick?"

"About thirteen days ago. I..vomited.. all of the time..always thirsty.."

"Don't worry my friend. Everyone in the *Alliance* is praying for you. I've sent for *Anthony* to perform an exorcism on you," he tried to reassure his friend.

"Will it work?"

"I sure as *Neilso* hope so," expressed *Theseus*. Then, suddenly, he became light headed and sat next to the bed, silent while waiting for *Anthony* to arrive. A few moments later, *Scott* led *Anthony* in.

"*Anthony Levan*, I'm glad you could come on such short notice. Are you ready to perform?"

"But of course, my *Lord*," he bowed appropriately. *Anthony* doused most of the torches and moved the mirrors so the light from outside did not penetrate the room. Then he asked the non-believers to leave - including *Theseus*..

Theseus refused. He wanted to see how *Levan* performed. Although he did not believe in the exorcist's faith, he felt everyone could believe what they may. Technically, the *Alliance* was a theocracy ruled by *Theseus*.. But he let all religions persist in his territory - even if he did not agree with what they stood for. This was the case with *Anthony*. *Theseus* knew he could do little other than morally support his friend. *Anthony*, on the other hand, honestly believed he could cure *Hendriks*. And since it made both *Hendriks* and he happy, *Theseus* allowed him to perform the practice of *Hendriks'* choice. With fascination he watched *Levan* give his friend, a *Lord* in his own right, some potion, followed by him going into his dancing and chanting.

After fifteen minutes, he proclaimed he finished. *Hendriks* did not look visibly better, but at least he was resting comfortably.

"Thank you," expressed the ruler of the *Alliance*."

"You're welcome, my *Lord*. Now what can I do for you? You don't look so well yourself," he noticed.

"Ah, I see you have a feel for these sort of things. I don't know what the deal is, but I've really been thirsty lately. Still, I can manage."

"I know you don't believe in my practice, but what would it hurt," he offered.

"Thanks for the generous offer, but I'm more concerned with *Sir Stone*. You know he doesn't practice his faith all that often. I fear that may be the difference."

"Maybe in your religion, but not in ours. Here it's more a matter of how you honestly feel, rather than how much of a fanatic one is."

"I guess I do put my biases into everyone else's religions."

"You know, I'm glad you're such a cooperative and understanding leader. After all, this is a proclaimed theocracy we live in, and by all rights you could impose your religion on the rest of us."

"What? And be like 'messiah' *Tristan Pytel*?" joked *Theseus* sarcastically. "I want you to personally be-head me if I ever dictate my religious beliefs on the rest of the populace."

"You know I can't do that - it's against my religion!"

"I know," laughed *Theseus*. They had a good laugh for a few minutes before returning to a more somber note. "How long will he be under?"

"I gave him enough to last two days. He should be in good spirits when he awakens."

"That's good. Here, let me reward you," he said as he pulled out a highly reflective polished ornament. "Here, take this. It was a gift from the gods - see it glows," he continued as he blew out the remaining torches. They were bathed in a purplish glow emanating from the rock.

"That's neat. Where did you get it, my Lord?"

"It fell from the sky following the coming of the apparition. I had the metal smiths work it into this object."

"Thank you. I'll treasure it for life. Is your armor made of this?" he asked knowing of the glowing armor *Theseus'* ancestors wore."

"No, but its close to what my great grandfather wore."

"Have you tested it to see if it has the same properties as *Leland's* legendary armors?"

"No, I've been too fatigued to since I've put on this armor the metalworkers made for me. Besides, it couldn't have the same properties - it doesn't glow red like the old one does."

"Has the alchemist analyzed it?"

"*Larry? Neilsonian* no! I wouldn't trust that crackpot with a sample of ferrous."

"Now *Theseus*, you're not being fair to *Walker*. Didn't he successfully detect that fake ore *Tristan* tried to pawn off on you in the guise of war reparations? If it wasn't for Larry, your swords would have broken on the first impact with a REAL sword."

"Any blacksmith would have detected the metals lower melting point and higher viscosity," countered *Theseus*..

"Well, if you think he's so worthless, why don't you get rid of him?"

"Why should I? If I deprive him of his natural curiosity, what good would that do? By giving him a few trivial artifacts to analyze, he feels he is doing something and he's happy. As my job is to insure people are happy, I throw most finds to him."

"Then why haven't you let him fulfill his job by analyzing these rocks. That would make him happy, and, in turn, you too."

"I would, but these are religious items. And as such, only people of the faith may obtain possession of such things."

"Did you just hear yourself? You sound like *Tristan*."

"Hmm. You are correct. I don't want to be a hypercrit, so I will give you the honor of bringing this specimen to *Larry* so he may analyze it," he said as he pulled out another rock.

Anthony grabbed it and thanked him before leaving for the Alchemist's house.

Theseus was alone in the dark and he immersed himself deep in thought. He let his mind wander, asking who or whatever was listening why *Hendriks* was ill. For a while, it seemed as though he heard someone on the other side - someone deeply perplexed. He tried to make contact, but all that met the attempt was gibberish. He gave up and went to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

It had taken nearly two standard weeks (six planetary) to repair the ground cars and get them in a working order. Now they were on the outskirts of the village they had designated as the most likely place of finding some sort of amicable civilization. During the voyage, some of my group reported various attempts at gaining empathetic links. But when acknowledged, a stream of unintelligible phrases would flood their minds. This elated but perplexed us. The joy was because it showed some form of intelligent life was on the planet (as if the attack on us was not enough proof). What perplexed us was the different structure and contents of the unknown thoughts. It is believed the Human brain is formed the same way for everyone on Earth. This is what allows empathetic communication to be undertaken by various peoples even if they speak

different languages. Yet here were attempts at communication, but no one could make any sense out of what was being sent. This meant the structure of the native's brains were different from ours. This should not have come as a surprise, for this is a different planet, with different forces acting upon the inhabitants here. Without understanding the natives, how could we hope to communicate with them, I wondered.

My answer was soon to be put to the test, as a castle wall loomed eerily before us.

We tried to contact the dwellers via radio, but there were no signs of them having that advanced capability. The walls were impossible to climb, and no points of entry were evident. I needed a better look, and the Tav provided the mechanism to obtain good reconnaissance. As I flew over the courtyard, I noticed a large runway of sorts, so I took that as an invitation to land. By doing so, I created quite an uproar. People, or rather more properly, the natives, were running all over the place and in total confusion. It was chaotic. Some bowed their heads and went to their knees, chanting mystically. I was beginning to suspect that landing was not as good of an idea as it seemed. In the distance, an imposing figure ran towards me, pushing people out of his way. I studied him at a distance, and I recognized something familiar about his look. His armor gave off a purplish glow - a glow reminiscent of the fuel used in the main reactor of the *Phobos*.

The figure raised his arms and the crowd calmed.

Thinking this was their leader, I instructed the cocom to integrate with my pocom. After entering the compulate mode, I waited what seemed like an incredibly long time before the program arrived at a usable dictionary of sorts. I keyed up on the mic, formulating my soon to be historic words. When I had them, I switched the mic to external speakers and began.

"People of the Vegan Star System. I have come here to converse with you about your role on this planet," I said remembering my training for just such a possibility. When the

compulcator translated into the native's language what I just said, the crowd was aghast. Again the armored figure raised his arms and silenced the group. Then he spoke.

"My name is Theseus the XVIII. It is highly unorthodox of you 'Gods' to 'converse' with us, for we are not your equals," he stated perplexed.

Oh no, I thought. I had botched it again. First we were attacked as invaders. Now I was being called a "God". Boy, when the shit starts flowing, it comes in clumps. How was I going to explain all of the contamination that I caused? I could continue to let them think I was a deity, but what good would that do? The more I thought about it, the better that option looked. If I told them I wasn't a god, they might think I was the devil or something. Not that I believed in such things. After the A - moral uprising of '38, religion was abandoned by most. But some older folks practiced, and some had even raised their kids (in secrecy) in the same manner. I decided to opt for the "God" role now and deal with the possible implications later.

"You are wrong. The mark of a true God is one who listens to his followers with interest and takes into account their whims," I stated.

The crowd grew really restless. They had never known of a god who actually cared, only of gods whom dictated. "If you are a 'god', do something miraculous," they shouted.

I was in a bind. What could I do that was miraculous? Apparently flying wasn't good enough. After some thought, it finally dawned upon me what I could do. Before the uprising, there were a group of religious fanatics who practiced a version of pseudo-medicine they termed "faith healing". It rarely worked, and when it did, it was later discovered that the "patient" either wasn't sick or had received real medical treatment elsewhere. If I could heal someone who was sick, that should satisfy them. All I would need to do is let twenty - first century medicine work on them.

"Bring me your sick, your wounded, your maimed. I shall heal them for you!" I proclaimed.

Immediately, droves of people made their way towards my vehicle.

Theseus raised his arms and thundered, "Stop!" The crowd acted obediently. "There is one amongst us," he continued, "who is most sick. I want him cared for first. If he is healed, then the rest may follow. But if not," he paused, "then only one life has been lost."

Then he went back to the large building from whence he came. He later emerged carrying Hendriks Stone. "God," he cried out. "Here is the sick man. Heal him. If you fail, may Searling take his wrath upon you," he preached as most of the crowd hissed.

I did not understand what a Searling was, but I told Theseus to lay the man next to my vehicle and then to back away. He did so, and I opened the canopy and jumped to the body below. The crowd was frightened. Then I realized my flight suit, including my helmet, was on. Taking it off, I wondered how I would have reacted to seeing a pilot in flight gear jump out of a flyer if I were a serf. I came to the conclusion I probably would think I'd seen the devil. Slowly, I walked to the lain body and observed it carefully. It looked very human, but it also had radiation damage, and didn't look like it would live very long. Gingerly, I picked it up and placed it in the cockpit with me. After ordering everyone away, I took off and headed for the rest of the group.

After landing I quickly jumped out and proudly proclaimed I had made a legal first contact. Then I briefed them on the problem - that of the natives thinking we are gods. They were shocked.

"You mean we've contaminated them again?" they yelled in unison.

"Yeah, you know we can't interfere in the life and death of others," yelled another.

I could feel a mutiny brewing. I wished my wife was around for support.

"You're hopeless as a leader Jaffrin. I urge we recall you," put forth another.

I had to act fast. "All right, quiet down. Now look, first of all, we had to make contact eventually. Though the method was unusual, we have at least made communication with the natives. If you would like, we can trash this line and start over. Or, we can make the best of the situation we now have and pull out all right. Now are you with me or against me?"

Although there was general disagreement with what I had done, the group gave in to my point of view. I was relieved.

"Good. Top priority is to return health to this sick person," I said as I lifted the native Hendriks from the Tav and carried him inside. The medical technician was not happy with what he saw.

"Paul, couldn't you have picked an easier subject? This guy is almost gone. At best he's got a two day limit on his life - even with treatment," he professed.

"I took the only one that was offered, and as for his current state, it is imperative that you make every effort to save him. I think the leader holds him to have great importance," I noted.

"O. K. Paul, but you owe me two big ones for this when we get back to Moria." Joysic ran a quick physical of his patient and determined what needed to be done to restore him to proper health. Then he efficiently administered the required amount of anti radiation sickness medicine to Hendriks. Of course, he did not know whether what worked for humans would work for Hendriks. This was because humans genetically adapted to radiation after the war of '41. And no one knew what the Vegan's tolerances would be.

Later in the day, Hendriks awakened for the first time in two days. He was briefly disoriented, then slightly bewildered, and then extremely confused by his new surroundings. For a few seconds he thought he died and was in caelum. That idea was dispelled as soon as he

heard the gods around him speak in a language he did not know. Surely, he thought, the gods should know his language. He tried to get up, but found he could not move. Great, now what, he thought as he lay still for a few libellius watching the people around him pass strange artifacts between each other. Then one of the boxes talked to him and asked his name. That was the clincher, he thought. For them not to know his name they definitely could not be gods. Therefore he would not be afraid of them.

"My name is Sir Hendriks Stone," he emphasized his Lordshipness.

"What do you call this place?" asked the doctor.

This confused him momentarily again, as he knew of no other life spheres. "We call this Linneaus," he answered.

"Well, my name is Joysic. How do you feel?"

"Numb."

"Good. How did you become sick?"

"I don't know," he answered foggily.

"When did you first notice symptoms of radiation sickness?"

"What is radiative sickness?" he asked bewildered.

"Its what you had. The symptoms are loss of appetite, great thirst, loss of hair, nausea, vomiting, blistering skin, pus flows.."

"I guess I noticed the first of what you mentioned 23 days ago."

Joysic knew that was impossible. If Hendriks had contracted them then he would have been dead 13 days ago. You must be confusing some of the symptoms with something else," he said.

I motioned for the doctor. "Joysic, I think you're forgetting something. One of their days is only equal to eight hours. Twenty two of their days is just less than four of ours," I reminded him.

"Yeah, you're right. There's your miracle. In two hours he'll be as good as new. Now what are we going to do about the contamination," he asked.

"That's a good question," I answered as I immersed myself deep in thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Tearle had his group specifically selected by the computer. He wanted the people in his group to have the same qualities, beliefs, etc. as him. And now that they were near the Northern Stronghold, it was time for him to let them in on his plan. Thus, he ordered his group to halt and assemble before him. When they were ready, he began his prepared statement.

"Survivors, we are about to embark on a new journey in the history of this planet. But first, I have to share with you something about yourselves. You believe you were randomly chosen by the computer to be in this group. I must say, however, that this is mistaken. You were chosen by me on the basis that all of you have grand ideas about your roles in society. Yet none of you actually do anything grand. I am going to change that for you. I will provide you with what you desire. I will provide you with success," he paused. "We are going to take over that town and install ourselves as leaders," he proclaimed.

The reaction was, expectantly, mixed. Some had objections, and he had again purposely chosen a few members precisely because of their likeliness to reject his proposition. He was about to demonstrate just how serious he was. From beneath his coat he pulled out a battle laser - a weapon banned from personal possession. Predictably, one member reacted as Tearle hoped.

"Those are illegal!" screamed Anthropologist Fischer.

Tearle knew exactly what to do. Aiming the weapon at Fischer's head, Tearle threatened his life. "Look Fischer. You're either with me or against me. If its the later, I have no qualms with killing you on the spot! Turn or burn - it's up to you."

Fischer was stunned. Battle weapons were outlawed years ago and all had been supposedly destroyed. To have one brought a prison sentence. To threaten anyone with one brought an automatic death penalty. Tearle was off his trans, thought Fischer. There was no telling how far he would go. To acquiesce would allow the destruction of civilization on this planet. He had to stop Tearle now, before he became too powerful. Motionlessly, he mentally felt for his geologic hammer hanging off his belt. With its six kg head, it could kill a man from 5 meters if thrown hard enough. His course of action decided, Fischer quickly lifted his hammer off the belt and in the same motion flung it tomahawk style at Tearle's head. The hammer flew three meters before melting. Fischer stepped back, knowing he had not only failed, but had now given Tearle an excuse to kill him.

"You lose," said Tearle as he emotionlessly squeezed the trigger. The beam shot out from the weapon and hit Fischer just above the eyes, then continued through him and the next tree. Fischer's decapitated body slumped to the ground, his heart still beating rapidly for several minutes.

"Anyone else disagree with me?" asked Tearle fully knowing no one would now. "Good, now is here's how we'll take that village..."

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Back at the camp, things were running smoothly. Much had been learned about the natives since talking with Hendriks. He was now fully recovered, but he begged to stay so he could learn more about us. But I had made a promise to Theseus that Hendriks would be back in two hours local - and "Gods" are supposed to be punctual. So I called the patient over and showed him how to harness himself in the trans. Afterwards, I borrowed a camera from one of the workers, telling him thanks and that I hope the natives enjoy the show. We then took off for the courtyard - two minutes away.

When I arrived, the area was jammed so full of people I had no where to land. I surveyed the area to find the least amount of people and hovered over the spot. "You must move away," I commanded as I nudged the jets enough to send searing heat to the crowd below. After this demonstration, they made room for me and I commenced landing procedure so they could see Hendriks waving to them. It worked. The people bowed and began praying to me. Though not exactly what I wanted, I accepted it and opened the canopy, allowing Hendriks to step out first and greet his people.

Theseus disbelieving, said hesitantly, "Hendriks, is that you?"

Hendriks walked briskly to him and explained to him that he was indeed who he appeared to be. "I'm healed, my Lord. That man," he pointed to me, "with the aid of his people helped me."

"How do you feel?"

"As good as ever," he beat himself in the chest.

It was time to introduce their guest. Hendriks turned towards the crowd and began to address it. "People of the Alliance, I present to you Paul Jaffrin, from the orbis Earth..."

That was my cue. Confidently, I disembarked from the trans. I carried with me a camera, my pocom, and a gift (all Gods must bring gifts - or was it the other way around?)! "People of Linneaus," I began. "I offer you the chance to become free from your serfness, from wars, plagues, to be free from the acts of god, and free to pursue intellectual and cultural advances."

The crowd was disbelieving. Aside from all of the big words, they had heard it before. One of the reasons Theseus' regime enjoyed such popularity was because he allowed everyone to do basically as they pleased, so long as it did not interfere with what someone else was doing.

"Prove it!" yelled someone from the crowd.

"Have not I proved it by healing Hendriks?" I countered.

"Any sorcerer could have done that," the faceless voice bellowed back.

"What if I showed you something neat?" I asked as I pulled out the camera. "But I need a volunteer. Who would like to take part in an experiment of my power?"

Immediately, a young woman from the audience stepped forward and introduced herself. "I'm Lady Bowry, and I want to disprove your claim," she professed.

"Fine. If you'd take a step closer I could show you what I'm going to do," I said as I raised the camera to my eyes. When she was closer I took a picto of her. Much to my chagrin, the flash went off, and she started screaming.

"I'm blind! I can't see!" she cried. The crowd grew restless. Shouts of "Neilso" began to be heard above the murmur.

"The effects are only temporary," I tried to calm them. Sure enough, as soon as I completed my sentence, she proclaimed she had her sight back. I took the picto out of the camera and handed it to her. She grabbed it and studied it for a few minutes before grasping what it was.

"That's me!" she cried. "How did you do that?"

"Like this," I said as I adjusted the resolution and took a picto of the crowd. Two seconds later, the image came out and I handed it to the Lady Bowry. She could recognize herself, and was surprised when she turned around and saw the crowd looked the same as it did in the picto.

"Go ahead, pass it around," I offered confident of the camera's ability to resolve each person in the audience. As each looked at the image and identified themselves, I leaned against my trans and watched them grow convinced of my story.

When it finally arrived in Theseus' hands, he knew I was telling the truth. He walked over to me and extended his arm. "On behalf of the Appreacor Foedus, I welcome you and your invitation of a better orbis to our world."

I shook his hand vigorously and proudly proclaimed, "People of Linneaus, you WILL establish a new order, with our help." And as if on cue (which it was), the ground cars and other vehicles of our expedition rolled into the courtyard. "Theseus, I will need room for my subordinates. "Will you oblige us by 'loaning' the usage of one of your buildings?"

"Of course. Let me show you and yours to thou rooms," he extended as he led us through the crowd. "These are the party chambers. They will be yours for your duration. Tonight, we will hold a banquet in your honor."

"I'm very much impressed with the architecture," I complimented.

Satisfied all was square, Theseus left us to ourselves, until the time of the party. Then I explained to him that we weren't really gods, just people like himself. Luckily, Linneaus had its equivalent of aborigines, so I could explain to Theseus that to us, he was an aborigine, and we were like him as to he was to the aborigines. While Theseus did not like being compared to an aborigine, he understood what I attempted to communicate. After the festivities (which lasted into the morning), Theseus toasted me and my group admiringly. "May this meeting lead to a lasting peaceful and prosperous future for all of Linneaus."

And with that, I thought I had solved the issue of contamination.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Tearle surveyed his newly acquired surroundings with an aura of power emanating from within. The takeover had gone even better than he had planned. All he did was fly over the village and proclaim himself the people's savior. They were skeptical at first, but when one of the "disbelievers" threw a rock at his trans, Tearle dropped a phosphorus bomb on a random hut and burned it to a crisp. Then he reiterated that he was the Deus and that he had come to irradiate the disbelievers. After taking over the main keep, he called on all the inhabitants to profess their belief in him. The few who did not he rounded up like cattle and placed with cows. Left with his followers, he drafted them into the newly formed *Holy Appugnoare*.

Tearle had big plans for them. He showed them how to produce muskets and he was ready to introduce to the merchants the idea of mass production. He showed the guards a better way of defending territory, and he briefed the advanced guards on the latest 21st Century military tactics. Tomorrow he will give them their new weapons which will insure his superiority over the planet. He will give them repeat action rifles and grape - shot cannon. The bows, arrows, and swords of the other nations would be no match for Tearle's revolutionary firepower.

The walls of the throne room - his now, were scarred by laser bursts. Although the general populace quickly gave into him, the King and his guards had held on stubbornly, until Tearle showed his awesome power by downing an entire rank of the king's knights. The King immediately abdicated and Tearle pillaged whatever he could. It was not much. 12th Century living left Tearle with few resources in this one of the poorer kingdoms. He knew time was not on his side. He figured about a month would be all he would have to teach these pious the principals of an industrial society. The rescuers would arrive soon, he thought. He had to be in firm control of the planet before then. For when they arrive, he means to give them one heck of a surprise!

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Sir Cadmus was extremely upset at having his knighthood withdrawn by his Lord because of his failure to find the intruders. Not even Akbred could persuade Lord Tristan of Cadmus' truthfulness. While under Akbred's potion of all knowing, he skillfully recanted the events of the trek to where the "Jorganites" had been. He told of his findings -nothing, and of the three day search of the area for signs of the invaders. Reluctantly, he had gone back to tell Tristan of the failure, only to find Tristan incensed with anger, whereby he stripped Cadmus of his knighthood.

The event was still gnawing at him, when Chaben informed him that his audience was required by their Lord. With that in mind, he went quickly to Tristan's throne room. At the entrance to the room, Cadmus was greeted by a high ranking officer of Tristan's army. The officer led him through the double oaken doors and announced lowly Cadmus' arrival.

Sitting at Tristan's huge T shaped table were the thirteen surviving knights of his elite guards. Cadmus looked at the fourteenth and fifteenth empty spots, one of which used to be his. He reflected grimly on the details of Sir Larry Hogans' death, which according to Joenesle, was very hot. Cadmus would avenge Larry's death, he hoped as he unconsciously took his seat. Only after the other guards squirmed, did he realize his mistake. Still, his Lord had not yet kicked him out of his old seat.

Tristan stiffened slightly and began. "I am sure you're all wondering why I called you, and especially you, Cadmus. As you know, there has recently been increases in the duration of incursions into our territory by the adversarius. I have talked with the other members of the Tristan Feudalation and they all agree something must be done to stop these breaches of security. They left the something for me to decide. After much consultation with Akbred, I have come to the conclusion that Theseus and his allies are about to attack us. The recent incursion by the aliens seems to back this up. Though they supposedly know nothing of Theseus and his ways, they were found near his border and they seem to have been put under some sort of amnesia. Also, the prisoners are making notes of our defenses and layout. My only conclusion is that they plan on being rescued and then show Theseus' troops our weaknesses. It is thus that I issue two directives. The first is that we must launch a pre-emptive strike against the A.F.A.. However, it won't be a pre-emptive strike per se. Actually, it will be the final offensive we have all wanted!" he said as he slammed his fist on the table, creating a loud and long echo in the cavernous room.

Akbred was visibly shaken, but he quickly maintained a damper on his external signals. Inside, his mind raced to foresee the outcome of this. It would mean the death of Chloris. Over

the last week or so, he had developed a strong lust for her. So much so, he had stopped the interrogations and the sexual harassment she received by Chaben and his guards. And now she was going to die, he wept. But not if he could help it, he confessed to himself.

The reaction of the knights was predictable. All of them smiled brilliantly with expectations of the culmination of a war which had lasted generations - since before the beginning of recorded history, in sight. If they proved themselves once again worthy of their knighthood, Lord Tristan would give them their own keeps and some territory with which they could build new strongholds. Being generally greedy, they looked forward to the coming battle with great enthusiasm. Of the sixteen people there, Cadmus had the greatest enthusiasm - next to Tristan's. Cadmus hoped he could lead an army into battle against forces of the A.F.A. He was sure that if he proved himself, his knighthood would be restored. With that, he would receive a tax break and a gain in salary. And here was the chance to avenge his friend, Larry Hogans death. Yes, he thought. I will kill Hendriks for Larry.

Tristan waited patiently a few minutes so he could read everyone's faces, and potentially their thoughts. For a second, it seemed as though Akbred was troubled, but he returned to his normal stone like appearance. Cadmus seemed happiest to Tristan. He was sorry he had reduced him in rank, but now Cadmus would have a chance to redeem himself.

"I can see by your response," Tristan continued, "that you approve of my directives. The time table for the offensive is as follows: I want the army equipped to march tomorrow. I want them to assemble around the fifteen of you - yes Cadmus, you have a temporary reinstatement of your rank. Sir Neilson, you will designate whose command the draftees will be under. I want the attack to begin in two days. We must take Theseus by surprise. And remember -this is a pre - emptive strike. Akbred - when you're around the prisoners, you will 'inform' them of the strike. If my hunch is right, they'll escape and tell Theseus of this and he will have a small reception party for us. Of course, they'll be expecting an equally small party, not the full-fledged Appugno

that it is," he gleamed with pure delight. Now be gone with you, and may Diripio help us win and seethe absolute extinction of the Theseus family line and of the Alliance!"

With that, everyone rose from the table and left.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Last week had been a nightmare for Chloris. This week was much better. She was moved from the dungeon and placed in a bigger room - complete with a window, bath, and a bed. She was assured by Akbred that the others were being treated similarly. She knew Akbred had a thing for her, and she had used it to her advantage on several occasions already. She had got over her original disgust at being violated by Chaben and his men, though every now and then she had nightmares of being raped by them. If not was not for her studies in primitive cultures, she wouldn't understand what or why they did it (rape was unheard of by 2030 in all but the remote areas of human deprivation). She was having another nightmare when Akbred strolled in unannounced and unnoticed. Akbred noticed her tossing and turning, so he went over to her and kneeled beside her. Wanting to appear to comfort her, he reached out and touched her. Chloris convulsed and screamed violently, terrified at the touch.

"Its only I," he said professionally.

Chloris shrank from him, visions of his telling Chaben to have her flooded her mind. "I only want to comfort you, I noticed you tossing and turning restlessly."

"You scared me," she muffled.

"I'm sorry. I have some bad news for you. Lord Tristan has ordered all of your deaths. You see, they really should have been more cooperative."

"Including me?" she asked hopeful of a negative answer.

"Yes."

Her spirits fell. "Oh," was all that she could muster.

"I might be able to swing a stay of execution - if you..."

She had an idea of what that meant, but she saw her chance and she went for it. "What do I have to do?"

"You know, certain favors, I think," not expounding on what they were.

"What kind of favors?" she pressed.

"You're the only prisoner with a room. The others are in dungeons. You should be with Ashford and Vladimir, and Chaben and his pigs should still have their way with you. I've taken a big risk allowing you to reside here. If Tristan found out, he'd have my head," he lied. Actually, this was all part of the plan to isolate her, to get her to accept him, and finally, to get her to talk. "So when I spare your life, I want you to understand the risk I took."

She understood the gravity of the situation. She also knew that someone had to remain alive to tell the rescuers of what happened here. For all she knew, my group might be dead. Reluctantly, she decided that she would sacrifice her strong personal values in order that she survive. "Suppose I comprehend what you're saying. What will happen to the others?"

"They will be put to death, as will someone with the appearance of you. After the execution, I will take you to my private chambers."

"When will I die?"

"Tomorrow."

"Can I see them before then?"

"I'll see what I can arrange."

"Thanks."

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

The bridge of the **Sako** was inundated with tension as the time to exit was approaching. Would the ship make it? Though the ship had been altered to withstand the after effects of egression, the crew was uncertain as to the extent of damage they would receive.

"Well Mario, here is where we either praise you or lynch you," commented the Commander.

"I hope its the former and not the later," he remarked.

"Well, we find out in a minute," claimed Willos as the Chrono counted the last few seconds. At zero, the ship exited the wormhole and light from Vega filled the main plasma display device. The Commander opened a comlink to the crew. "This is your Commander. We have completed egression from the wormhole. Stand by for the shock wave."

Everyone except the bridge crew went into their protective cocoons developed to protect their genes from the radiation after bursts. As the ship slowed, the shock wave overtook the ship. The lights flickered off, and the emergency ones came on. All sound ceased, as the entire power network circuited itself off. This was not only expected, but desired. The craft had been re-opticed to provide E. M. P. radiation protection that was standard on all military but not civilian craft. When a large burst of radiation was detected, circuit breakers would shut off so as not to allow conductance to equipment that might be damaged by electro-magnetic effects. It

was calculated that two minutes would be sufficient enough time to allow for the passage of the pulse. The power on would have to be accomplished manually. It was eerie on board, and everyone was nervous, as Willos gradually brought the system back on line. No one spoke until the ventilators sprang back to life, then cheers went up simultaneously. They had withstood the effects of egression. They were now only two standard days from the second planet.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The master sergeant surveyed his new leader suspiciously. The tall stocky man before him did not seem to radiate brilliance. He had dark black hair, which was in total disarray. He wore glasses, having lost his contacts. His physic was almost gorilla like. He certainly did not look like or act like the "god" he claimed to be. But he did provide the army with strange new weapons which were more powerful than any he'd seen during his career. That they were produced by only one man astonished him. They were so identical, he could not tell any of them apart. He wondered how they would do in battle.

"Master Sergeant Toso reporting as ordered," he announced.

"Good. I want a report on how the draftees are handling the rifles I developed for you."

"They are confused with the operation of the rifles. You only trained 20 of us in the usage of them. The 1800 others ha.." he was cut off."

"1800? What about the other 400?"

"As I was saying, they had no idea how to use them. 370 wounded themselves - 118 mortally - while examining the rifles."

Tearle was not happy with this development. It meant the postponement of the attack.

"Alright, here's what you do. Divide everyone up into groups of 90 and instruct them on the proper usage of the rifle. You have one day to make everyone proficient in the use of them," he ordered.

"By your command," said the Master Sergeant as he turned and left to train the "recruits".

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Ashford was physically and mentally drained to the point of exhaustion. Akbred's women were too much for him. They were on him night and day - eight hours out of the eight hour Linneatian day. Between the s. and m. routines, they kept asking him where he came from and what some guy named Theseus was doing. By end of the third day, he could no longer perform, he was so exhausted. Vladimir didn't have it any better. When one set of women were through with him they would switch to Ashford. All of this took place in the dungeon with Vladimir and his interrogators on the left, and the rotting corpse of Aridine between. For the first time in a standard week, there were no women upon them. Ashford weakly turned to see if his friend was awake. He could not see past the dead body.

"Vlad, you awake?"

"Yeah," he answered weakly.

"We have to get out of here."

"Right. But how?"

"I don't know." They laid chained to the floor in silence for a few minutes. Then Chaben's face appeared in the window.

"There is someone to see you," he bellowed. The door opened and Chloris strode confidently in. She was immediately overcome by the odor of Aridine, and promptly barfed on the wall. Recovering, she looked past the corpse still chained to the floor and saw the Russian's naked and abused body chained also to the floor. Despairingly, she turned to her left to see the African's bronze naked body similarly abused. She turned and told Chaben to leave them.

He did so, closing the door behind him stopping whatever circulation there might have been. Chloris bent over Vladimir, and taking a timid breath, asked how he was.

"Can't you tell?"

"Yes, I imagine so," she said as she made a closer examination of the damage. She had always thought him attractive, and had often envisioned herself rocking him. The sight of his former "grapes" which were now only a shadow of his former self distressed her. At least they would soon be out of their misery, she tried to look on the bright side. Maybe now would be the proper time to tell them, she thought. "I can see by both of your looks that you're having a rough time of it," she said in typical European upper lip. "Well, there might be some good news. You are to be executed T. R. W., both of you."

She was met with a very long silence. It was Vladimir who spoke first. "At least the torture will stop." Then after a few seconds added, "and to think I once.." he winced as he continued, "wanted to pork every girl in school. But what about you? You seem to be doing quite well for yourself."

Expecting the question to come up, she gave her prepared answer. "In all appearances I am to be executed as well. However, in actuality, I will be spared so as to provide, uh, entertainment, if you will, for Akbred," she said with disgust. "While I would normally prefer death to this, someone has to be here to tell what's been going on here."

"I see, so I guess this is good-bye?" offered Ashford.

"I'm afraid it is," she said as she kissed them both. "I will not forget nor allow others to forget you!"

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Stovis was a strong man. He had done well against all that Akbred threw at him. Through it all, he had divulged no information about Theseus' defenses. During the three months that he was a prisoner, he had much time to plan for an escape. All he needed was the chance, and he would be ready to seize it. It seemed to him that it would never come, though. Still, he had hope that it would. It was while thinking of his wife that the chance presented itself. Chaben opened the barred door, and stepped in.

"Eat up," he ordered as he placed his swill on the floor near the door. Then he turned his back and locked the door behind him. As was usual, Chaben then sat in front of the door, and proceeded to eat his own dinner. It was much more palatable than what the prisoners ate, and was one of the rewards when they spoke up. By eating in front of the prisoners, Akbred calculated that it would be only a matter of time before the aroma would break the prisoner's barriers. Chaben leaned forward and brought a big spoonful of food to his lips. "Ummm. Someday, all this could be yours," he teased. Then he swallowed the food, a big grin on his face. Suddenly, he began gasping for air. His arms flailed his chest, and his face turned red. The struggle for air seemed lost, as Chaben's body slumped to the floor and laid purposely against the door.

Dennis took his chance. He reached between the doors and grabbed the keys. Then he opened the lock and carefully opened the door. No one was in sight. Dennis quickly searched the guard's pockets and pulled out a knife. Then he fled to the secondary entrance where he was brought in. As he expected, there were only two guards, and one was asleep. Stealthily, he

sneaked up on them. Then he picked up a rock and threw it away from the guard. The distracted guard turned to see what made the sound. He didn't see the escapee pounce on him and sink the knife deep into his chest. He was dead. Before the sleeping sentry had a clue as to what was going on, he too was dead. His escape from the castle completed, Dennis ran like Neilso to the friendly territory of Theseus.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Akbred was startled by a knock on the door. He excused himself from the table and answered the door. It was Chaben who was doing the knocking.

"It worked! He's gone!" exclaimed Chaben.

A look of relief crossed Akbred's and Tristan's face.

"When?" asked the Lord.

"About 20 minutes ago. It's taken me that long to recover from Akbred's potion," he said.

"I'm glad you did recover. There were a few variables I was unsure of when I concocted that stuff," admitted Akbred.

"You mean I really could have died?"

"Yes."

Tristan let out a laugh. "A. K., every day you show us why YOU are the interrogator and not I," professed their Lord.

"Thank you, my Lord. How long before our betula reaches the nest?" Akbred changed the subject.

"He'd better be there tomorrow, I'm planning on it," confessed Lord Tristan.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

A man came scurrying from the bushes like a rat right at the Cathedral's gates. He did not look familiar to the guard, so he raised his bow at the object and commanded it to stop.

"Halt! Identify yourself!" he screamed.

"It is I, Dennis Stovis, of the Appugno. I have just escaped from the Feudalation," he bellowed back.

"Relax while we check on you," issued the guard as he sent for the man's wife. When she arrived, she was allowed to look through a porticus to see her husband. To her, it looked like him. One could never be sure, though, so they asked her to ask him a question only he would know the answer to.

"How old is my sister?" she asked suspiciously.

"Which one?" came the answer. "Peggy or Marilyn?"

"You tell me?" she queried.

"They're the same as you - 29."

"Denny, it's you!" she cried.

The guard slowly lifted the door and allowed the escapee in. Immediately, the man and his wife embraced each other and kissed for a long time. Gingerly, he pulled away and told them he had to tell Theseus something extremely important. He was led directly to his chambers.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

I sat across from Theseus, who looked pale. "Are you alright?" I asked.

"I think I might be catching a cold," dismissed the ruler. "I could have a doctor look at you, if you'd like?"

"No, I'll get over it. Besides, I want to get back to our original discussion. Now please continue to tell me why castles are impractical?"

"Because they cause stagnation, they're obsolete, and they're indefensible," I contended.

"Why?"

"If someone wanted to hurt you, they could just out flank you and proceed to the nearest town."

"What good would that do? You'd still have a castle capable of harassing supplies and launching an offensive at leisure. Besides, who in their right mind would attack someone without attacking the castle first? The castle is the pinnacle of defense. To take a castle is to insult your enemy more than you can possibly imagine," he countered.

"You miss my point. You are uselessly wasting forces by attacking easily defensible positions when you should be raiding the countryside and effectively taking the nation, save for a few token resistance points."

"You'd have to take them out sometime, so why not do it when your troops are strong and fresh?"

Just as I was about to answer, Eaker Sr. strode in and whispered into Theseus' ear. "Send him in," ordered Theseus.

Dennis Stovis walked briskly in and knelt before his leader.

"Rise," commanded his king. "What important news of my enemy have you?"

"While being a prisoner, I have overheard 'Lord' Tristan prepare for an attack against you. Apparently, he plans a pre-emptive strike tomorrow or the next day."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes, I did pass quite a few troops on my way here."

"What kind of force are we talking about?"

"They looked to be mostly raiders - horses and bows, a few swordsmen and the like."

"Raiders?" he frowned. "I wonder what he plans on hitting with those?"

"Well, I did overhear them say something about teaching the farmers a lesson."

"If I may interrupt," I interceded, "this is precisely what I was said one should do when attacking an enemy."

"Yes, you may be right. Perhaps you could help me deal with them?" asked Theseus.

"I would be happy to direct your defense, if it is allowed."

"Of course, you are so wise."

"I need a complete rundown on the standing size of your army, your reserves, your equipment, and supplies. Also, I would like a map, no I think I can make a better map from my trans. Which reminds me, how would you like to take a ride in my trans while I do a recon?"

"I'd love to," he voiced enthusiastically.

Several minutes later, we were airborne. If he hadn't seen it earlier, Theseus would not have believed it. We flew 900 meters above his grounds. The view was transmitted to the artificial canopy, giving one the impression there was only glass between the ground and the trans. I showed Theseus how to enlarge any object just by touching that area on the canopy. He could clearly see people walking about the grounds. Enlarging the picto, he could even tell what weapons they had, and whether they were awake or not. The concept was incredulous to Theseus. He returned the scene to the real-space screen, and saw for the first time what his land looked like from above. And he saw how truly small his Cathedralis was. The thought sunk into him deeply, before he was able to seize upon the benefit of the view. He turned his body to see Tristan's boundary, and touched the display to enlarge it. The woods exploded into view, every tree, every animal was seen, including the advance party of Tristan's. Sure enough, they did look like raiders. The tactical implications hit Theseus almost immediately. "What are the chances you'll let me direct my defense from here?"

"None," I declared after much thought. "I'm afraid I've done too much already," and I headed for the Cathedralis.

"Why?"

"Because I've interfered again."

"You said you would help me."

"Probably, but not the way you expect me to."

"Where does this leave me defensively?"

"Exactly where you should be - on your own!" I landed the trans and let Theseus out.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

"That's what it looks like," I said as I slammed the pictos onto the table.

"Should we tell Theseus?," asked my wife.

"I don't know. If we tell him, he's sure to prepare for such a large attack as this appears. By doing so, we will be interfering again."

"And if we don't help them?" she asked.

"Then we'd better prepare to move - fast. Theseus is only expecting a minor raid. I doubt he can survive without our help. And we know how Tristan thinks of us."

"I don't think we have much choice. The way I see it, we'll be on this planet for quite some time, so we'd better make friendly with the natives," she offered.

"Yep, you're right," I concurred. "Let's call a congress," I offered as the pocom quickly linked all of the group together.

"If you'll watch carefully, you will see the pictos I took of Tristan's armies massing at the border," I instructed. "As you can see, that is no raiding party. It is my guess that Tristan has dealt Dennis misinformation, so as to dupe Theseus to believe a small raid was in progress. This would reduce the amount of available forces for the defense of his stronghold. And as you can see, Theseus is just bluffing when he says he has over 100 knights. Ninety percent of them are in actuality just scouts. His guards are asleep half of the time, as can be seen in this pictobyte," I proved by showing a wonderful image of 5 guards sleeping in the forward nest. "Unfortunately, his logistics is no where near where he said they were. Most of what he has is far away, and would not arrive in time to contribute to the coming battle. I don't see him holding out from a siege for over a week - tops," I concluded.

"What is the worst case scenario?" asked the temporal Specanner.

"If we did nothing, Theseus's regime would fall, and a stain of darkness would envelop the planet. Also," I ignored the chimes of the others wanting to comment on my last statement, "I don't think we can move within two standard days. As you can see, Tristan's forces are only eight standard hours away. Thus, we must interfere not only on Theseus's behalf, but on our own as well!"

"I agree as well," entered my wife. "But in what form should our aid be?"

"Theseus is very interested in the implications of sub orbital reconnaissance. If we provide recon data to him, he will be delighted, and it would strengthen our bond. Also, it's not that bad of an interference by us: 'Data shared with natives ranks at the bottom of the interference scale'," I quoted.

"In what form should the data be?" asked a member of the congress.

"Strictly recon. I'll take the transport and provide Theseus with raw imagery - not enhanced, showing Tristan's units, their weaponry, their location, and possible avenues of attack. I'll also show Theseus *his* forces, their weaponry and state of readiness, as well as SIR imagery, to show any tunneling attempts Tristan may make."

"Just what are his forces?" asked another congressional person.

"O. K., here's the picture," I said as Cheryl helped me call up Tristan's forces. "He has 13, maybe 14 high knights, each commanding three armies. The armies are deployed 120 degrees apart, with the Cathedralis as the origin. Two armies consist of 3,540 men, and the northern one has only 2,230. Of the 3540, 2100 are swordsmen, 100 pike men, 4 are knights, 208 are purely movers of equipment, 200 are engaged in tunneling, 80 are with a huge catapult,

and the rest are archers. Tactically, I'd say Tristan has done an incredible job considering the 'backward' nature of Linneaus."

"Now lets examine Theseus' defenses," I continued. "He has 10 knights, and four armies. Three armies are deployed against the other three, with one in reserve. Each army consists of: 2 knights, 1780 men divided as follows: 500 swordsman, 900 archers, 170 pike men, 100 laborers, and the rest are counter - tunneling. At the Cathedralis, his Fourth army has 4 knights, 154 ballistas, 56 catapults, 500 inept guards, 908 swordsman, 3800 potential draftees with no equipment or armor, and 69 special 'invisible' forces. I still haven't figured out what Theseus meant by that. Lastly, he has the castle itself. Over the last few minutes I've come to realize what an asset that is. With Theseus' meager forces, he has no hope of defeating Tristan in the open field or woods. However, because he has a wall to hide, uh, fight behind, his forces can wait until a good opportunity presents itself. With the primitive technology these natives have, Tristan has no choice but to tunnel the walls or climb them. And with the height of the walls, there is nothing Tristan can do without being noticed. Also, his arrows and bolts will travel further and faster than those aimed up from the ground. Thirdly, there is the element of surprise. Tristan cannot see into the Cathedralis, so he has no way of knowing Theseus' weaknesses. By letting Theseus know of Tristan's forces, Theseus can prepare and gain the surprise himself. As long as he maintains the surprise, he can win. Also, by using the recon data, he can provide accurate and withering fire at the enemy. Besides, there is nothing Tristan can do without us, and Theseus, knowing. So you see, even though we are outnumbered, it isn't over yet. On the contrary, I propose it has just begun!"

"When will Tristan engage Theseus' forces?" asked someone.

"Looks like tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"Knowing the way Tristan acts from what Theseus has told me, I can tell he wants Theseus to engage him in the open fields and crush him there. He doesn't have to attack the Cathedralis directly. He knows it would cost too much for him to try a direct assault. Hence his ploy to lure Theseus into battle. If Theseus were smart, he should withdrawal all of his forces to the Cathedralis perimeter. Not only would that save his castle, but it would also be an insult to Tristan, showing the prisoner was not believed," I suggested.

"I hope so," commented Cheryl.

"Now lets prepare for the attack."

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

Throughout the night, Tristan's armies moved into position around Theseus' Cathedralis. Sir Bob Nelson commanded the northern army. Sir Cadmus commanded the eastern one, and Sir William Priser commanded the westerly army. Sir John Riper commanded the mining operation, and the remaining knights were integrated amongst the various armies, with two held in reserve. As the sky brightened with the light of Vega, Lord Tristan conferred with some of his recruits about the coming battle. As the minutes before the attack ticked away, the armies on both sides became tense with anticipation. With a brilliant burst, Vega rose above the nearby mountains and exploded forth as a beautiful golden star rise. With a slight fog lifting from the trees, the whole scene looks quite peaceful. As soon as Xianthia rose completely above the mountains and bathed his armies in it's light, Tristan gave to order to attack. His order was passed from man to man, as the armies began their assault.

They quickly charged into the woods where Theseus was expected to be. After running for nearly five minutes, they became tired and slowed to battle walk. They had not met the enemy. Tristan grew uneasy. He felt something was wrong. He was committed, and there was no

turning back now. With a growing weariness, he ordered them to press onward. The element of surprise he so desperately wanted seemed not to be there. The troops were four hours from the castle. Only time would tell now whether he had made the right decision.

The guard was startled into awakenedness by an approaching rider. Sleepishly, the guard peered through the archers hole and observed the rider. It was Vioni. The guard was expecting him. Slowly, he rose the gate and allowed the cloaked figure entrance. The rider acknowledged the guards respect as he passed him on his way to see Theseus.

"I wish I had more troops," commented Theseus across the table to me. "If what you're showing me is for real, and I don't doubt it for a minute, then Tristan outnumbered me four to one."

"I can assure you this is true. As far as more troops go, my group cannot help you there. We can, however, help you with logistics. From what we've seen, Tristan's archers only have 6 - 8 bows each. On the other hand, you have nearly 12. While the total number of arrows you have is lower, they will have more effect than his because of the greater height and speed they possess. We will also make more for you. If you loan us 50 arrows, we will give you 500 in 10 minutes - uh, 30 of your minutes," I corrected myself. "Within three Linneatian hours you'll have 120 arrows per archer. With numbers like that, you could easily fight a battle of attrition, inflicting more casualties than he can afford to take."

"What about the swordsmen and knights? They're armored and arrows are useless against them."

"Arrows are, but bolts are not. I can do the same for the bolts as I can for the arrows. When we're done, you'll have 60 bolts per ballista, as opposed to the current 10."

"That will help a great deal, thanks. Looks like I've reduced the odds quite a bit. But he still has an advantage over me," confessed Theseus.

"Right, but we want to reduce the odds even further, so we'll even produce copies of..." I was interrupted by a figure bursting through the door.

"My Lord," it began, "Tristan's armies have begun the advance. We withdrew as you ordered and are taking positions alongside the regulars."

"When did he start?" asked Theseus.

"At first daylight. He has three armies marching from all directions on us."

"That means he's only about two hours away. Call up the reserves and get more volunteers. The battle is about to begin," proclaimed Theseus. The figure left, leaving Theseus and I alone. "I'm going to need that stuff sooner than I'd hoped," he told me. "Sir Eaker?" he called his guardian who quickly entered and took station alongside Theseus.

"What is it, my Lord?" he asked.

"Bring Paul a quiver of arrows and a few bolts. He's going to make more for us, but he needs them to see how they're made."

"Of course, my Lord," vouched the midget.

"Well, I have a lot of things to do Theseus. Ask Eaker to bring them to my room. We'll make them as fast as we can," I promised as I rose and left the room.

Theseus sat alone, thinking silently about the coming battle. He reached outward to his deity for guidance and strength. Instead of contacting Searling, he got someone, or something, else.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

Louie had been sleeping deeply, unaware of the outside world. He did not remember when he began dreaming, but for some unexplained reason the dream changed scene suddenly and dramatically. One moment he was operating on Merri after Merri's battle with the spider Weber, and the next he seemed to be some kind of feudal lord during the middle ages. The strangeness of the dream startled his consciousness. Where did he get an idea like that from? He suppressed his wonderment, fearful the dream might dissolve before its significance would become clear. As he fought to regain the dream, he started to feel visions which seemed too real to be part of the dream. Louie awoke and placed the interprecon over his head. He instructed it to record the previous images as well as any that might follow. With the machine acknowledging his order, Louie reached not inward, but out in an effort to gain a link with whoever or whatever contacted him before. Slowly, and with great difficulty, he reached the sender. When he tried to communicate, all that met him was gibberish from a confused and startled being. Louie then linked his pocom with the interprecon and had the compulate program translate what the other was thinking.

"You're not Searling. Who are you?" thought a bewildered response.

"I am Louie LaSalle, President of the United Earth Foundation. Who are you?"

"You mean you don't know? How can one be on the Almighty's thought path yet not know who I am? Where is Searling?!" many other questions flooded in, taxing the computer's ability to translate them.

Louie was confused. Who was Searling, and what does the "Almighty" reference have to do with anything, wondered Louie. "Where are you?" he thought.

"I am in my Cathedralis. You mean you can't see me either?" was the response. "If you

don't know who I am, where I am, and can't see me, how do you come to possess a voice and hear my thoughts?"

The President was no longer confused. He remembered Jack telling of life on the second planet. That must be where the message was coming from, he figured. With a link already gained, Louie hoped that whoever was on the other side could establish empathy. He concentrated hard, and with much effort broke through Theseus' defenses.

Everything that Theseus knew was available to Louie. After scanning his memories, a great understanding of Linneatian life and culture was opened for Louie. To his displeasure, he also found the contamination he feared. "Theseus the XVIII, or should I say Ornako," he began, "I now know everything you do. You also know much about me, though it will be some time before you comprehend it all. I must ask you a favor."

"How is it that you know my true identity?" asked a fearful Theseus.

"I know all about the A. N. A., the war between your ancestors and Tristan's, and about your grandfather killing those two whores for experience," confessed Louie.

"What whore? I don't know what you're talking about," lied Theseus.

"Yes you do. But if your memory ails you, I shall refresh it. Your grandfather, while stationed at Lord Georgain's keep, wanted to gain some experience before his quest to find Weland began. He figured he could gain experience by killing some people. He rationalized that the easiest people to kill were whores. He killed one, but was discovered by another, so that one was murdered as well."

"I know all there is to know about you and Paul. I want you to tell him he is grounded and that his president demands a link with him."

I will," obeyed Theseus.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

Upon hearing from Theseus that the President of the U. E. F. demanded to speak with me, I knew two things. One was that the rescuers were near and the other thing was that he is upset. This is not going to be easy, I thought as I solomonly gained a telecommunications long range link.

"Mr. President, you wanted to speak with me?" I asked knowingly.

"Absolutely," came the reply. "First, you are grounded. I do not want you to provide the reconn data to Theseus which you promised."

"Why not? You don't know the situation down here. Where did you get your info from - Theseus?"

"Yes," was the terse reply.

"Well that source is biased. He doesn't know *why* we are doing the things we will for him. All he knows is our response, our actions, not our reasons," I countered.

"Then please explain - for the record - the reasons for your actions," he ordered.

"O. K. When we crashed, we did not know there were indigenous life forms on the planet. As we set up camp, we were attacked by the natives. They killed four and captured three of us. Tearle felt they would attack again, so we split into two groups, with Tearle commanding one and me the other. After we separated, I took my group to Theseus' area. After a few Linneation nights, we heard of an impending attack by Tristan. Lord Tristan's forces were the ones that attacked us earlier.

"I had three choices, as I saw the situation. One was to stay with Theseus and not help him. We originally decided to do this, but then we saw what a huge force Tristan had deployed against Theseus. We did not feel he could survive without our aid."

"The second option was for us to move to another location and ignore the battle. We figured it would take two standard days to for us to move. We had only eight hours available to do so."

"The third option was to stay and help Theseus. We are giving him no new technology weapons. All we are doing is enhancing his capabilities. We do not want Tristan to win, because we already know how he feels towards us - it would mean the death of us all if we stayed and Theseus was defeated. We figured if we could just keep the battle going on long enough for you'ns to arrive, then we would be all right. By the way, how far out are you?"

"One standard day. I cannot endorse your actions, nor can I condemn them. I suppose I would do as you have if I were in your boots. Can you prolong the battle until we arrive?"

"No problem. The way I see it, Tristan plans on laying siege to the castle anyway. I think Theseus can hold out until you arrive. He doesn't quite know the scope of the assistance we're giving."

"Oh? And just what else do you plan to do besides providing reconn data and a few thousand arrows?" Asked a concerned Louie.

"You forgot about the few hundred bolts. And I haven't told him about the surprise we plan on giving Tristan's little breech attempt."

"What kind of surprise?" he yelled.

"We've placed seismic sensors around the perimeter. When their forces get close to the wall, we'll have Theseus' forces counter-tunnel and pour molten glass into the mine," I confessed.

"The heck you will," screamed the President. "I demand an empathetic link NOW!"

Louie LaSalle reached out and picked up on my consciousness. As he delved deeper into my mind, he learned of my plan to decisively defeat Tristan. And he learned my reason for doing so was motivated by revenge and guilt for my crewmate's deaths. He also learned of the radiation contamination, my pretending to be a deity, and of the lack of initiative shown by any of the other survivors. With my actions now known, he needed to understand my reasoning behind them. Slowly and methodically, he skillfully removed the barriers I placed in his path. Through a series of flanking maneuvers, my motivation opened before him. As he studied it carefully, he realized why I had done what I had. Louie was impressed. He ceased his search and continued the previous transmission.

"Paul," he began. "I now understand why you acted the way you did. Without the true knowledge you just shared with me, I was unable to comprehend your decisions. Armed with your most inner thoughts, I can see they are the right choices. I hereby dissolve from the official record any ideas of your guilt. You did good P. J. I wish Tearle had done as you have." Then a thought crept into him. What is Tearle doing with his group? "Where is Tearle?" he asked.

"I don't know. We lost contact when we arrived here, and I've been pre - occupied with things here," I offered.

"All right. I am going to see what he is up to now," he said as that basically terminated our conversation.

Louie called for Tearle on the radio, but there was no answer. He tried to gain an empathetic link with him, but not even the master creator of the "remote consciousness unification theory" could gain a link with someone uncooperative.

CHAPTER FORTY

Louie sat quietly, deep in thought. The idea that Tearle might be on the loose did not sit well. He urgently needed to get to Linneaus and find out what the renegade is up to. "Rueben," he asked the acom to acquire the engineer. "What is the soonest we can be around Second?"

"Twenty hours. Why?"

"What I have to tell you is so secret it is beyond classification. But before I clue you in, I want you to assemble the following people in the forum at once: Lee Roalnvoo, Al Severly, Dr. Teresa Bennet, Tu Xeng, and Calpruni Pisoni," he commanded.

"By your command," was the efficient response.

Twelve minutes later, they assembled as instructed.

Satisfied that everyone was waiting, Louie began to speak.

"The matter I am about to discuss is extremely, and I stress extremely, sensitive. No one other than we seven are to hear this. I have even disconnected all monitoring units so as to sanitize the record. Although the doctor does not have any classification, I have given her a temporal level of two. I will explain my reasons for this shortly."

"Doctor Bennet," he turned towards her and addressed her directly. "Would you show us the records of Tearle Durko which I asked you to bring?"

After calling them up on her libcom, she linked it with everyone's pocoms, so they could see the records. "About five years the subject was brought to me by the former nation of Germany. The Army complained of his psychosis, and they wanted me to treat him. I brought him into the ward and observed several different psychological problems with him. They included acute paranoia, schizophrenia, delusions of grandeur, and worship of 20th century dictators and their ways. After two years, he was finally released, having been treated. In '52, with his and most other nations crumbling under our world order, he regressed to pre- treatment activities. After treating him again, my report states 'prognosis for a final cure is dismal. The subject, when under extreme stress, can reverse his progress and quite possibly break'," she quoted.

"Thank you doctor. So what, you may ask." There was no reply. "Doctor, what are the chances that he, under great stress and in charge of a large group, might regain his delusions of grandeur and try to emulate someone like Hitler?" ask Louie.

"Very good, I think," she offered.

"I can tell you he has," he stunned the audience. Before anyone could react, he quickly elaborated on his statement. "About a half hour ago, I tried to contact Tearle. He refused. But, as he did so, he let me in enough to see that he has cracked, and its much, much worse than any of you can imagine."

He waited a few moments to let that sink in before continuing. "He has cracked, and he has started some kind of warlike state. He has armed the natives with advanced weaponry, taken over 1/3 of the planet, and seems to be planning one big try for total control soon. All I can tell you is that the Second is called Linneaus by the natives, and they are technologically in the middle ages. They will be totally contaminated at the very least, within eleven hours, and may even be enslaved by then. We must get there before then. Rueben, how soon can we get there?"

"Twelve hours at the least," he whispered.

"You have to do better than that," ordered the President.

"Twelve hours is the best I can do. That includes a limited point to point transfer that is extremely risky. Most of the time is going to be spent slowing to orbit the planet."

"Why not transfer directly to the planet?" asked Lee.

"You see what happens when we exit a wormhole. If we came out too close to the planet, the emissions would fry the life on the planet which we are trying to save," countered Rueben.

"So there is no way we can be there any sooner?"

"No, I don't think so, but I will check things out."

"Oh. I guess we have no choice then but to take twelve hours. I only hope they can persevere until then."

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

Tearle looked at the latest reconn data with glee. He had captured the northern continent. Soon, he will be in control of the entire planet, he hoped.

"Sir," began his Sergeant, "we have completed training the troops on how to operate the rifles. Shall we begin training them in grenade usage?"

"Of course, and after that you will instruct them in usage of gas masks," ordered Tearle.

Yes Sir," exhorted the Sergeant as he spun on his heels and left to train the "volunteers".

Tearle returned to the recon data and the map of the enemy positions. He was very impressed with the size army the southwestern nation was fielding against the southeastern nation. He made some quick calculations and determined the battle between the two would be at its height tomorrow afternoon. It would be the perfect time for him to attack, when the enemy is divided and engaged. He called a logistics directory from his pocom. His stores were tremendous. He had almost 700,000 people, literally at his disposal. He had that many rifles, half that many grenades, yet only one-eighth as many gas masks. The gas he manufactured was the deadly T. S. O., used successfully by S. F. In. F. E. in 2050 - 2052. Although Tosbow production was halted immediately upon unification of Earth, there were still a few sites where barrels of the toxin could be found. With the aid of an old MilCenCom (Military Central Computer), he had tracked down the location of several dozen. He and fellow members of O. D. O. R. (the Organization Demanding Old Rules) seek a return to the glory days of imperialism and world conquest before the imposition of unification. After Earth was unified, all armed services were disbanded, and the weapons of mass destruction were melted and became raw materials for the "surge to the stars". The U. E. F. had no place for the 34 million members of the armed services. They filled the unemployment and workfare services. 90 percent were successfully "programmed" for civilian life. The remaining 10 percent could not get the urge to kill or the desire to design greater weapons of mass destruction out of their minds. These people eventually withdrew into their own little worlds, and small Pacific island nations sprang up occasionally. Using various means, they came together and formed the alliance Odor.

For two years he plotted and waited for the time to be right. Finally, an opportunity presented itself. Tearle was contacted in March of 2054 to provide security on the upcoming flight to Vega. The chance to establish an order on a foreign world far from Earth appealed to Odor. Quietly, the group aligned itself to be in position to constitute nearly half of the *Phobos*' crew. It was pure luck that the natives attacked upon crash landing, and even better when Paul split the group and gave Tearle his half. Their dream was being realized.

Tearle was troubled nonetheless. If he attacks too soon and without the proper training, the green draftees might break and give up the fight. Another variable he dealt with was what kind of weapons should he equip them with. Should he send the draftees into battle with muskets and rifles, or tanks, planes, and atomic bombs? The factor was the lag time in production of the weapons. Not knowing how long it would be before the rescuers would try to establish order, he decided upon a three-track approach to the problem. Since relatively low tech weapons could be produced quicker than higher tech items, he opted for producing nearly as many of those as he could. While producing less of them than he could, he used the left over production capacity to slowly build high tech machines. Thus, if the rescuers came quickly, he would at least have an army equipped with rifles. And as their arrival was delayed, more mid tech weapons would be on line, and maybe a few high tech weapons would be ready. With Linneaus' low tech level even a few weapons of mass destruction would suffice to conquer it.

The biggest variable of all were the rescuers. How soon would they arrive, he wondered. Depending on their arrival time, they might find Tearle at some point along the way to total control. Tearle hoped they do not arrive until after his goal is reached. If they arrived at the beginning of the battle, they might resist him. He was sure they were carrying no weapons. It is expressly forbidden in the Compact to transport weapons. Besides, he thought, they had no indication he would do this. What then could they do? Satisfied they could do nothing, he returned to studying the pictos of the enemy.

CHAPTER FORTY TWO

As Tristan's armies drew closer, I had Joe distribute the arrows and bolts to Theseus' forces while I flew a recon of not this area, but rather Tearle's capital - Nilreb. I could easily

spot the roughly 3/4 of a million men. As I flew closer, I could see that these men had not swords and arrows, but rather rifles. And what was that? Grenades? I quickly imaged the scene and zoomed in on the details. All of them had rifles, and yes, grenades were being thrown unskillfully. The grenades did not shock me as much as the rifles. Even Theseus had crude examples of grenades.

I searched the area, but could not find where the arms were manufactured. Then I realized they were built in the same way I made the arrows for Theseus. This meant that Tearle must have had a rifle and grenade on him when he was on ship. But how did he get it on board when all weapons are outlawed? This was the contamination that Louie feared most. I recorded what I could and sped back to base, eager to see what else I might see after computer enhancement.

To my horror, the thematic imager showed what looked like a wooden plane under construction. Although it appeared to be a world war two class vehicle, upon extreme magnification I discerned that it was E. M. P. hardened. The last year any vehicle was hardened to withstand the pulse radiation from a nuclear explosion was in 2041, after the American - Soviet war of that year. With the plane exhibiting characteristics enabling it to fight on a nuclear battlefield I realized what Tearle intended to do. There could only be one usage for such a weapon, and it's intended target would be the rescuers and my group. With Tristan's forces less than 1/2 hour away, and Tearle training his for what probably will be a battle for control of the planet, an ominous feeling swept over me. The whole planet was heading for one big social, ecological, and environmental convulsion. The thought of it made me pass out.

I was awakened a few moments later by Cheryl gently caressing me and whispering softly..

"Honey, are you all right?" she asked with genuine concern.

"Do you remember the war of 41?" I asked ignoring her question.

"Of course, I was 19 and engaged to Fredr.." her voice trailed off to silence. "Why?"

"Do you remember the fallout?" I led the question.

"There wasn't any," she recalled.

"Oh yes there was," I countered.

"Huh?" she asked.

"There were a few deaths from it in the U. S., but Russia was very nearly depopulated. Do you know why?"

"No," was her only reply.

"At the time, I worked with the N. W. C. A. while my brother worked at Zeros. We at Nowca were given the task of decontaminating the area hit and to prevent fallout from the Mirvs from reaching inhabited areas. You never saw fallout?" I asked.

"No."

"Thats because we did a great job. Unfortunately, Russia did not have a weather controlling medium. Fallout quickly saturated the nation. Though only 40 million were killed in the initial blast, the fallout killed many more. At first it seemed as though no one won the war, but within 5 years, almost 80 million died from radiation poisoning. The horror of it led to the outlaw of nuclear weapons in '47."

"Yeah, so what's your point?" she hated history lessons from me.

"Well, since we controlled the fallout and developed the genetic corrections to damaged cells, you were not exposed to the awful consequences of nuclear war."

"Oh come on, I'm not naive," she interrupted. "I know what kind of destruction those things were capable of."

"Agreed. Then let me show you something," I offered as I displayed the picto of the plane Tearle has under construction. "I took this 20 minutes ago," I said as I looked at the chrono. "But that's not in and of itself important. What is, is this," I showed the image of the fiber optical avionics bundle. "This is E. M. P. hardened," I announced and awaited her question.

"What?" she asked knowing it would lead somewhere important.

"Electromagnetic pulse radiation. A by-product of a nuclear blast, it projects a momentary surge at the planet's surface, causing non-protected electronics to fail. Things like pocoms, transports, replicators, etc."

"This plane is hardened in such a way as to allow it to continue operating even after a nuclear blast," I explained.

"So?" this time she led me.

"In '49 the last nuclear device was sent to the sun. Since then, there has been no need to protect against E. M. P., so nothing is equipped with hardening anymore. Except this plane is, and do you know who has it?"

"Tearle?" she asked cautiously.

"He's planning on fighting on a nuclear battlefield and prevailing. That battlefield is here," I proclaimed somberly.

Cheryl was speechless before the realization hit her. She began to cry. "I don't want to lose you," she hugged me lovingly.

"Nor I you," I offered as we hugged each other for a very long time.

CHAPTER FORTY THREE

"There they are," yelled the north tower guard. From his vantage point atop the complex, he could see the enemy walking towards him. The 35,000 troops reached their assigned points and they quickly spread out and surrounded the castle. The ringing of the Cathedral's bells warned us of their arrival. As agreed, I quickly took off in the trans and proceeded to my observation ceiling of 350 Meters. From there I watched the battle as it unfolded.

Tristan's northern army, under the command of Sir Neilson, met Theseus' forces. Rapidly, several scalers were brought by slaves to the outer wall. Once it was fastened to the wall, many troops filled the huge stair-like structure and made their way to the top. Just before they would have reached the top, Sir Hendriks poured oil lit by phosphorus onto the structure. Immediately, it burst into flames. Many troops were burned, and those that escaped the fire by jumping were injured by the 30 Meter fall. Hendriks' missiliers easily killed their prey. Neilson abandoned that part of the plan and proceeded with the second phase.

Sir Cadmus prepared his scaler/bore for his attempt to reach the top wall. As they moved their equipment forward, catapults rained huge stones upon the defending force to provide covering fire for the slaves pulling their load. Most of the rocks merely bounced off the 4 meter thick walls, and debris rained upon their own forces, slowing the advance and aiding the defenders. Realizing this, Cadmus had his troops withdraw to a safer position until the bombarding stopped. This exposed the scaler to enemy attack, but Cadmus had constructed his machine differently than the rest. His scaler had a mounted ram and bore screw, to provide a dual threat - that of flanking over the wall or of punching through it. It was 3 meters taller than the wall it meant to breach. Cadmus placed 28 archers on top of it to harass the interior of the

castle and to prevent the enemy from defending against it. He also had it armored, at a significant weight penalty. This doubled the slaves necessary to push it, but the scaler would be impervious to attacks.

Sir Tenise was not having good luck at all, conversely. I watched in amazement as his slaves pulled a scaler towards the outer wall when suddenly the ground beneath it opened and swallowed the machine. Through an incredible lack of planning or something, the slaves pulled the scaler directly over one of the tunneling attempts, and caused it's collapse. Neither the machine or the mine were viable threats anymore.

Lord Tristan was a scared man. First, Theseus evaded engaging him at the border. Then one of his scalers was burnt prior to its use. And now another scaler was put out of action by the ineptitude of his own troops. And to top it off, it collapsed one of his mines, killing two birds with one stone! Still, Tristan did have all the numbers going for him. The surprise was gone, if not actually reversed. For the first time, he thought this battle might end like all of the rest - a draw.

CHAPTER FORTY FOUR

The peasants assembled in the courtyard to see the execution of the spies. Like all killings, this was treated by them as a time of festivity. They rarely had the opportunity or the reason to party, so when they did, they really whooped it up. All except for one family, though.

Late the night before, some guards came and took the Miller family's oldest daughter - Michelle. They gave no reason for their abduction of her, so the family could only assume she had done something wrong, and they would hear about it in the morning. The only thing they heard in the morning was that there would be three killings, and one was to be female. So when

the call came for them to attend, they did not, fearful of what they might see. If they had shown up, they would have known the reason their daughter was taken from them.

With the crowd anxious, the brilliantly clad executioner walked to the block and set it up. Then he grabbed his favorite weapon, a large axe with a sliding lead weight attached to the top, and proceeded to test it on a large squirming pig. It was a clean slice, and he threw the meat to the waiting audience. Kill, kill, kill, rose the chanting group. Obliging, he ordered the first prisoner to the stalk.

Vladimir was totally disoriented and in shock. Being hooded, unable to see, and prodded in various places, all the while being pushed up stairs, and finally on a wooden stage. Foreign words chanted repeatedly crushed all thought in volume. Then, as a different pattern to the noise was felt, he was pushed in a bent over position and a head ring was placed around his neck. He could not get away from the binding force. The noise, the fear, and the terror of it made him puke.

The crowd grew silent. His best opportunity passed, the executioner hurriedly yet skillfully put all of his weight into his attack. The axe blade bit through 5/8 of Vladimir's neck before aided by the impact of the "finishing" stone. The caped figure reached down and grabbed the separate head and flung it into the audience. A fight broke out over who would get the prized "head stew".

While the crowd was verbalizing it's joy, the composters took the remains to the pile of fertilizer which was used to grow the food prisoners ate!

Ashford Thornbe was next. He was similarly treated on the stage, and the fear in him was dominant. As he was hinged, he quickly noticed the smell. It was a smell he had sensed recently. It was in the dungeon. It was death. He elieved himself through all three orifices. He was unable to catch his breath from the chunks he blew, before he too as decapitated.

After his body was taken care of, Chloris sadly looked at the opening of her room and watched as the peasant girl who replaced her was brought to the ring. She tried to empathize with her, but Chloris was unskilled at such. The men in the crowd became angry upon seeing that a woman was being murdered, especially one as potentially bountiful as Michelle appeared. It did not matter, for what is decreed occurs. The executioner ignored the boos and with more conviction than ever before, swung down hard and at an angle, sending her head flying into the crowd! Chloris turned away and wept for a long, long time.

CHAPTER FORTY FIVE

The battle for the Cathedralis raged at a fervor pitch for nearly four Linneatian hours. Then a lull descended upon the battlefield as both sides tallied their losses and examined the tactical situation. On Theseus' side, the losses were relatively light, although because of his fewer forces, the effect was greater. Over 2000 of the defenders lay dead, wounded, or missing. Almost 1/8 of Theseus' forces were therefore out of action.

Tristan's forces had broken through two of the four primary walls. The Secondary wall was nearly undermined, but successful counter-mining staved off collapse of it. His losses were massive, though because of his larger force, the overall effect was not too great. 8,547 lay wounded, dead, or missing. This amounted to less than 1/10 of his force. Not one of his undermining attempts worked. This alarmed Tristan. Again, his nemesis seemed to have all of the luck. But Tristan has a few surprises up his sleeves.

Even now, while a temporal lull was in effect, Tristan was readying what he hoped would be the penultimate weapon, a huge catapult towering nearly 100 meters into the air. From its hidden construction site in the woods, when complete, it can hurl a boulder weighing a ton into the heart of the enemy. And at one boulder every eight minutes, Tristan can bombard Theseus

into submission. Because of his pet weapon, he was in no hurry to quicken the pace of battle. Actually, he felt he could afford to stall it for a while. There were three reasons for this. One was that his forces could use the rest. The notion that he did not care about his troops was just propaganda put out by Theseus. Secondly, the catapult will not be complete until the next afternoon. Third, and most importantly, he wanted Theseus to suffer. A victory over Theseus would be no victory at all unless Theseus suffered grimly. Tristan would make sure he did.

The lull lasted until sunset, when traditionally all fighting stops, not to be continued until sunrise. About two hours before sunrise, I awoke and convened a meeting of the defense council. Situated along the huge u-shaped table were Theseus, Hendriks, Eaker, Cheryl, and myself.

"As you know," began Theseus, "sunrise is in two hours. The battle will begin shortly thereafter. Eaker, how's the morale of the troops?"

Eaker cleared his throat and spoke in his normal high pitched quiet voice. "The guards are all geared up for the battle. On the other hand, the recruits are disillusioned and, I have to tell you, some are even deserting."

"What?! People are leaving me in my time of greatest need? They should be axed!" commanded Theseus.

"If you wish, then so be it," answered Eaker.

"Hey, wait a minute," interrupted Cheryl. "Just because they deserted doesn't mean you can have them shot, so to speak," she contended.

Theseus was visibly uncomfortable. Women were never allowed in this room, let alone allowed to speak here. It was only as a personal favor to me that she was present. I could tell

Theseus was regretting his decision. "Why not? Anyone who deserts me doesn't deserve to live beneath me."

"Why do you think they deserted?" she turned the question around.

"I don't know. Maybe they're too chicken to fight for their homes," put forth the leader.

"I'll bet they're just afraid they'll die. How many civies die in battle if they don't fight? One, two, maybe four? If they don't fight they live. You've already lost 1/8 of your forces. Those are not good odds to your normal peasant. Faced with a 15% casualty rate I'd desert too," she maintained.

"Cheryl's right," I supported her. "Maybe the peasants do not know what it will be like to live under 'Lord Tristan's' rule? Not knowing what it would be like, I'd probably take a chance on living under Tristan, rather than not living at all."

"O. K., belay that order Eaker," agreed Theseus. "Hendriks, how long will the walls last?"

The banter continued for another 1/2 hour or so, while Cheryl and I discussed the situation. Knowing we would be helped by prolonging the battle, we talked about various ways of doing so. Then she hit upon the big one. It's obviousness deceived me at first, so I quickly dismissed it. But as she offered more advantages, I knew it would work.

"Excuse me," I interrupted. "If we understand you correctly, there will be no battle if the sun does not rise?"

"That's correct, but why wouldn't Xanthias rise?" asked Theseus.

"I'm not saying it won't, but what if it were to be cloudy, or rainy. Would the fight be taken up in the morning?"

"No, we don't fight in the rain," professed Hendriks.

"Good, that's what we wanted to hear. We can state there will be no battle then, as we shall make it rain," I offered.

"But how? It hasn't rained in months," asked Theseus.

"We have ways of controlling the weather. I am quite proficient at it. We can delay the battle for you."

"What good would that do?" asked Eaker.

"The longer this battle lasts, the greater the likelihood our rescuers will arrive and put things right. Once they arrive, all battle on Linneaus will cease. Our job is to make sure the battle lasts until they arrive."

"And you're sure you can do it?" asked Theseus.

"Absolutely."

"Then get to it," he commanded.

"Yes, your 'Lordship'," I mocked his ordering of me. Cheryl and I left for our quarters and put together the C. W. C. (Compact Weather Controller). We installed the device into the trans, and went through the usual preflight procedures. Cheryl discovered that the unit needed calibration, however. I had forgotten that the last time it was used was on Mars, and the climate here was much different from there. We set about the task of recalibrating it, when not five minutes into the process, the Linneatian equivalent of a chicken announced the beginning of the day. We were too late to prevent the start of battle. Soon, small boulders from Tristan's catapults flew into the courtyard. We entered the trans and headed for a safe spot to continue the rain making process.

CHAPTER FORTY SIX

Both sides greeted the battle refreshed and with enthusiasm. On the ground, Tristan's forces rallied against the defenders. As the sun rose higher in the western sky, the immense catapult was illuminated brilliantly. At 3/4 complete, it was already 80 meters tall - 10 taller than the trees. It was seen from the Cathedralis for the first time, and a sense of dismay overcame the defenders. Within an hour, the secondary wall was infiltrated, and Tristan's forces surged through the opening. Hendriks withdrew behind the safety of the last wall. Satisfied the last of his living units were safely behind the wall, he ordered the flood gates open. Tristan's forces were standing in the middle of a dry canal. The water surged past the open gates and into the canal, drowning thousands of the attackers. Facing Tristan was a deep canal, flanked on one side by a high wall he controlled, and on the other side by a wall controlled by Theseus. Tristan had overlooked the possibility of water crossing, and was now faced with no other choice but to lay siege to the Cathedralis.

CHAPTER FORTY SEVEN

Around noon, we finally accomplished the calibration of the C. W. C. It took so long because of the enormous differences between our home on Mars and Linneaus. Linneaus revolves in the opposite direction. And with a day of only eight standard hours in length, the rotational energy of the planet whipped winds to near thunderstorm strength. This tends to disperse any rain clouds we developed. When Cheryl and I tried a test squall centered over the Cathedralis, the winds and Coriolis effect blew it into the mountains, where it dissipated.

"Its a good thing Theseus was not counting on me to save the day," I remarked upon our failure.

"Hey, how could we have known it would be so difficult to control the weather here?"

"I don't know. I had kind of thought about this the other day when Louie contacted me. I should have started thinking about it then," I lamented.

"Hey, don't take it so hard Pauly. We'll just have to come up with another solution, thats all."

"I'm sure we'll find some way of keeping things going until Louie arrives. What gets me is what Theseus is thinking right now. I hope he hasn't lost trust in us," I remorse.

"You know what you need?" asked Cheryl?

"No, what," I became depressed.

"You need cheering up, and I have just what the doctor ordered," she advanced as her hands reached out and grabbed me enticingly.

I ordered the navcom to land in the mountains. Upon landing, Cheryl took my hand and led me to a small clearing. There we had an intimate picnic like the ones we used to have on Mars while we were dating each other. We feasted on each other many times, to the point of exhaustion.

Many hours later, we hiked to the top of the hill, and could see the Cathedralis from our vantage point. But off in the distance, we could see a large object towering over the woods. We looked at each other, silently exchanging thoughts. We went to the trans and flew a reconn of the structure. As we neared the machine, it's purpose became apparent. It was a huge catapult, and large erratics were piled near it. We took a few pictobytes and headed for the Cathedralis.

"Look, honey, the attack's stalled," she observed and pointed to the castle. Between two castle walls a canal was flooded, and we could see that it separated the opposing forces. I

noticed Tristan had no river crossing capability. The attack was stalled. I yelled in glee, reached back and kissed my wife, and landed the trans in the Cathedralis.

"This means the war," confessed Theseus upon seeing the pictos of the hurling machine.

"No it doesn't," I countered.

"With a catapult like that, he can bombard me into submission."

"No he can't - well, I take that back," I paused. "He can - if you let him. But you don't have to."

"What can I do against that?" he asked.

"Look, the only thing that thing can do is lob a few rocks into the courtyard. The odds are, it won't kill many troops, so your fighting ability will remain intact."

"So what? If he bombards the Neilso out of this place, what would be left to fight for?"

"O.K., theres something you're going to have to know and do if you want to survive this shitty excuse for a war. The first thing I want you to do is to take away the freedom your people enjoy."

Theseus started to protest, but I angrily cut him off.

"Wait! Let me explain first. You keep telling me about the tyranny Tristan's people live under. Yet many of your people respond with apathy, sarcasm, and by deserting you. The only way you're going to get their help is to take away their freedom - only for a limited time though. Once they appreciate how good of a leader you are, they'll do anything for you. Now then, this brings me to a second point. On Earth, we have fought thousands of wars, of much greater

destructive power than this. In all of the wars my people have fought, only a very few defenders have been bombarded into submission. And not one defender has surrendered when no enemy forces were in a position to occupy a territory after bombardment," I said ignoring W.W.II Japan. "What I'm trying to say is this - long range artillery may bomb the hell out of you, but if he can't move in to take the town, then you will likely prevail."

"Can you show me examples?" asked Theseus.

I called 'lil Pete and had the libcom access World War II data. On the screen, pictures showed the Luftwaffe bombing London during the blitz. Theseus could not comprehend the destruction being unleashed, but he could tell a substantial portion was engulfed by flames.

"As you can see, the enemy did a good job on the city. Yet, this city survived because the attacker had no way of physically occupying the city," I twisted a few facts. "Not only that, but this city prevailed and eventually won the war!"

A glimmer of hope arose in Theseus' eyes. "How long do we have to hold out before your help arrives?"

"Two and a half days."

"I don't know, it seems like such a long time."

"Yes, it is. But with my help you can survive this little skirmish and see the beginning of a new order on your planet."

"About this idea of limiting my people's freedom. How should I go about that?"

"I'll leave that up to you, but I do have some examples I can show you of people like Hitler, Stalin, and Xong."

"When your people arrive, can I kill Tristan?"

The thought shocked me. How barbaric, I thought. "No, thats another matter. When help arrives, you're going to have to make peace with one another. There will be no more wars on Linneaus."

The joy on Theseus' face was replaced with an obvious pout.

"Of course," I continued, "I could always let you finish this war without our help and then pick up the pieces after you have no power left," I threatened.

"Thats blackmail," exclaimed Theseus.

"Its also reality. You either end all of your differences when help arrives, or we let you destroy each other and then pick up the pieces. Either way, the end result is the same- peace."

Theseus said nothing, and an ominous silence descended upon us. I noticed a distinct change in his attitude towards me after that. I felt we were no longer friends. As I turned to leave, I left Theseus with one last thought.

"Take away their freedom, otherwise you'll lose them to their fears."

He did not reply.

CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT

Later that afternoon, the church bells rang loud, calling the inhabitants to the Cathedralis. When all but the minimum defense requirements were assembled, Theseus stepped out from behind the altar and strode superiorly to the podium. "Friends, Knights, peasants, and the like," he began in a powerful voice. "I have an important announcement to make. It has come to my attention that many of you recruits and volunteers are deserting. I have even heard talk of a separate peace with Tristan from some of you. This disturbs me greatly. It is not for fear of

losing you, rather fear that you do not understand what you're getting yourself into. Many of the deserters are crying for peace at any price. They will go so far as to give their freedom up, and yours too. Therefore, I would like to demonstrate to you what life will be like should Tristan rule. For two hours, all freedoms shall be eliminated. I proclaim myself as king, with all rights inherent in that title. All 16 -22 year olds are hereby drafted. A 5% tax on all transactions will be enacted to pay for this war. I recognize only one religion - that of Searling the Great. The practicing of other religions will not be tolerated. The civil council is abolished, as well as the popular court. I will make the laws. I will decide right from wrong. All rights are subject to my disapproval. It is my hope that after finding out what life is like under Lord Tristan, you'll fight for your rights. We are about to face our toughest battle. Soon, a huge catapult will hurtle large rocks into the center of our complex. Unless we are determined to endure and 'take it', we will not survive. That is why I am undertaking this great experiment. As of now, this castle is under my direct control!"

"Fuck you," yelled someone from the crowd."

"You have forgotten," boomed Theseus, "that you no longer have the right to speak. You must be punished and an example made of you. Guards, take him away!"

Eaker and Sirius made their way through the crowd and apprehended the dissident.

"There will be no more outbursts like that or I will have to punish you all!"

At the back of the crowd, a man began to protest, but his neighbor stopped him from continuing. "What do you want to do, ruin it for us all?" asked the neighbor.

"He can't do that, it's against the law."

"There is no law. If you want to commit suicide, do it alone. I don't want to go down with you."

The above conversation was repeated throughout the crowd. Theseus dismissed them, and they went about their chores.

After they left, I knocked on his door. He answered promptly.

"You were excellent," I complimented him.

"Thanks."

"I mean it. I haven't heard a speech like that since the Unification."

"I could learn to like this sort of thing - what'd you call it?"

"A dictatorship."

"Right. Those tapes you showed me helped a lot."

"I figured they would. But remember, it's always easier to be a dictator than a freedom leader," I cautioned.

"So I've found out. I used to think Tristan was so strong because he was a dictator. Now I know how weak he really is."

"Lesson one complete," I verified.

Theseus was silent for a few minutes before speaking again. "How's the rock shelters coming?"

"They're finished. When the rocks fly, all you have to do is send the civies downstairs and they'll be all right."

"Good. Now what about this surprise you were telling me about earlier," pressed Theseus.

"I talked to Eaker earlier and we've agreed upon a plan of attack."

"Well, tell me."

"Eaker is to lead a raiding party under the moat and behind enemy lines. The raiders will be mostly draftees."

"Why? They're untrained. They'll be massacred."

"Basically, yes. But it will do two things. One, it will rattle Tristan's bones knowing you can still attack. This may result in his infuriation, which in turn may lead him to make rash decisions."

"Such as.."

"Well, psyops might cause him to try to swim his troops across the now polluted moat, or it might even hopefully cause him to use the catapult beyond its capacity."

"O.K."

"Two, it'll help prove the point we're trying to make about freedom. Under a free government such as yours, you ask for volunteers and recruits. Under a dictatorship, the people get drafted regardless of their will to fight. After this is over, you can show your people the advantages your system has."

"Sounds good. When will Eaker lead the attack?"

"After the bombardment begins."

"Why?"

"In order for Tristan to use his machine, he'll have to withdraw his forces a bit, because he can't be sure it has much accuracy. When he does that, it will create a vacuum with which Eaker's forces will fill."

"Looks like its Tristan's move then," responded Theseus.

"That it is," I agreed.

CHAPTER FORTY NINE

When the two hours were up and the expected bombardment had not yet come, Theseus declared the 'great experiment' would continue. One result of this decree was the near quadrupling of the treasury. I urged Theseus to pay his real troops for the services thus far rendered. Even after paying them, there was still more money left. The sales tax was bringing in more money than he could spend. My government could use a few lessons from his, I thought to myself.

The day grew late, and I wondered whether Tristan's catapult was ready. Just then, my trans' collision avoidance system alerted me of an incoming object. It was headed for the southwest barracks, and the trace of the parabolic course showed the launch point to be the catapult. I rushed to the window just in time to see the huge rock drive down through the roof of the quarters and impact the stone floor. The impact shattered the missile, spewing debris throughout the building. A few unfortunates were caught in the wake of the shrapnel, and they lay dead. The bells rang forth, issuing a call to the people to head for the hastily constructed shelters.

The draftees were scheduled to begin their attack concurrently with the arrival of the boulders. Cheryl and I went to see how things were progressing on that end of things. When we arrived at the assembly point, Eaker was addressing the troops.

"...we cross beneath the moat here," he pointed to a map on the table before continuing. "Then we proceed under cover of the aqueduct until we reach the clearing - here. From there we'll be able to spot any weaknesses in Tristan's forces. When we spot them, we simply attack and exploit their weakness."

"What is our objective?" asked a young man.

"To harass the enemy," was the brief reply. "Now, if there are no more questions, we move at once.."

There were none. Eaker motioned for the draftees to form up outside the barracks, while the three of us conferred.

"They look smart," I offered.

"Yeah, they might even do some real damage - wouldn't that be ironic?" asked Eaker.

"Why?" asked Cheryl.

"Well, the only reason we're doing this is to upset Tristan and to shock us. Otherwise, these untrained people are useless to the war effort. If, somehow, they are able to gain a tactical advantage, that's an added plus. Instead of dying as martyrs, they'll die as heroes. Either way, the end result is the same. Tristan gets mad, our peasants support the war, and these men die," was Eaker's reply.

"You know, you just might have something there," I offered as I grabbed the map and studied it with the practiced eye of a warrior. "Look Eaker, instead of attacking there, why don't

you advance under cover of these trees. Then, swing around on the right and attack these reserve forces here. There's a dam nearby, and I bet they're using the water as a supply source. If you defeat them, and take out the dam, all of the reservoir will be released. Judging from the contours of the land, it looks like the flood will follow this course, cutting these several hundred off from the action. With no river crossing capabilities, they'll either have to swim for it - which means some might drown. The rest could be picked off by archers, or stay and wait for the flood to recede. So now your meaningless meander has been transformed into a tactical victory - and at no real cost, since they are, after all, draftees."

"You're right Paul. I'll tell them about it right away. Meanwhile, you two had better take cover from the rocks," warned Eaker.

Oh no, I had forgotten about that. How long had it been since the last attack? 4,5, or 6 minutes? I did not know. Grabbing Cheryl's hand, we ran to the safety of the trans. Once harnessed, we took off to the sound of the C.A.S. wailing ominously. Instinctively, I kicked on the S.R.B.s and we were flung out of harms way. Looking back, we saw a huge crater where our trans had been parked. That was close, and both Cheryl and I breathed a sigh of relief. These trans' were strong, but not strong enough to survive impact with a two ton rock. As I turned to return to the Cathedralis, the fuel alarm made itself heard. After many days of flight, my flying days were soon to end. Not wanting to return to the castle where an errant boulder might demolish my vehicle, we headed for the mountain where we set up the C. W. C. earlier. We will have to spend the rest of the war there until the catapult gets taken out.

CHAPTER FIFTY

The signal for the attack sounded, and Eaker's troops sallied forth to engage the enemy. Tristan's forces were completely caught off guard. Within minutes the dwarf's forces penetrated

the line near the dam. Shortly thereafter, they breached the dam and a torrent of water flowed between hills and cut off Tristan's units. Unexpectedly, they chose to surrender rather than swim across the raging river.

This so infuriated Tristan that he ordered the bombardment to be increased. The firing rate of the catapult was gradually increased to one rock every minute- and -a- half. After the eighteenth such boulder, the slaves became tired. Hauling up the twentieth rock, halfway to the top, four of the slaves passed out from over exertion. This led to an increase in the load that each of the remaining slaves had to endure. Being already overworked, they could not handle the extra load, and the line securing the missile slipped through their hands, gnashing and scraping skin off everyone's hands. The clutch kicked in to stop the fall of the cargo, as designed. However, because it had been conceived under the pretexts that only 3/4 of the mass of each rock would need to be supported at any one time, the unit snapped and the rock plummeted to the ground. It buried itself eight feet in the ground, with no consequential loss of lives. The three slaves killed were, of course, of no significance.

It took several minutes before the battery recovered from the initial shock of what happened. Tristan, broiling with anger, raced to the site, and drilled the commander in charge of operations.

"What the Neilso happened Sergeant?" he asked.

"My Lordship, I told you, uh, you said to increase the rate of firing," he wisely did not directly accuse his Lord of being in error. "These weak slaves could not handle it, and when a few of them keeled over, the rest let go of the rope. The machine failed to hold the rock, and there it is, on top of a couple slaves."

"Didn't the drawer foresee such a possibility?"

Quick to pass the blame, the sergeant told him no.

"Fine. Execute the drawer and the first twenty slaves which fell. Then load that rock and the next one and fire two at a time to make up for your delay," commanded the Lord.

"But my Lord, it's not designed for two at a time," he protested.

"What?" asked the astonished leader. "Another design error? Execute all who helped the drawer draw this debacle and do as I ordered anyway. What I command is law!" he proclaimed vehemently.

The Sergeant performed the executions as ordered, and then rounded up forty slaves. With fresh slaves, they were able to move the two projectiles into the sling and began to yank it to the top by pulleys. They arduously pulled it to the top, and began to swing it to get it to drop in the bucket. The kinetic energy of the swinging duo violated the braces' ability to accommodate the load, and the main beam snapped, releasing the pair. The rocks smashed through the floor and rocketed to the ground. Accelerated by gravity, they easily broke through many of the supports, with catastrophic results. For many kilometers the thunderous claps of timbers breaking boomed as the whole machine disintegrated. Scores of slaves and troops were killed and wounded. Tristan, deprived of his pet weapon, halted further battle and laid siege to the Cathedralis.

While Tristan was sulking over his loss, Theseus was jubilant over his victory. People came out of their shelters and watched "Eaker's Sneakers" parade the captured prisoners past the Cathedralis to the stockade. After the second night came without bombardment, Theseus proclaimed the great experiment to be over, and all liberties were restored.

CHAPTER FIFTY ONE

Meanwhile, to the north, the coiled spring of Tearle's armies sprang outward at the nearby nations. Armed with rifles, Tearle's forces easily swept aside all resistance. By the beginning of the third day, he was poised at the triangle of free countries. It had taken most of the bullets produced to complete the takeover of 5/8 of the planet. His army stood on the edge of the two T's territories. The only thing keeping him from his ultimate goal was lack of munitions. His people had been highly wasteful of bullets, and now had none. Tearle regretted dividing his production capacity between low, mid, and high tech weapons. If he had put all of his production into bullets and grenades, the final assault would be in progress. He could not afford any delays. Already his astronomers detected the rescue ship, only 1 1/2 days away. He needs to be in full control of the planet before they arrive. Without hesitation, he ordered all low and high tech development to cease and switch over to producing bullets and grenades with one exception.

CHAPTER FIFTY TWO

With the advent of the fourth Linneatian day, Cheryl and I returned to the Cathedralis, having spent the past few days on the mountainside. A sense of normalcy permeated the surroundings. Were it not for the occasional dead animal catapulted into the courtyard one hardly noticed a war was going on. During this time, both sides took stock of their casualties, and reinforced their ranks. The armies were so preoccupied with each other that they did not notice the increasing incursions from the north.

During this period of relative calm, our group conducted various experiments on the natives. To our amazement, there were only three genetic codes different between us and the Linneatians. They were practically Homo Sapiens. This led of course to the inevitable question

on how life arose here, and how it could be so similar to Earth. Not knowing anything about religion myself, I asked the only Theologian with us, and one of the few to claim to be one, to accompany me in interrogating Theseus.

"So Theseus, tell me about your planet?" asked Bishop Francis Scurra.

"What about it?" Theseus did not like the man.

"Well, how did life arise here?"

"The story varies from religion to religion. However, as I am the leader of this Theocracy, I make it a point to know all religions practiced in my domain. Though there are distinct differences between the old and new versions, they all seems to hold a few basic 'truths'. How we came to be on this planet is one of those understandings. According to my religion, there were people like us on Mysterio, a fourth lifesphere like ours. We were rafted there from a place far, far away from Xanthias, our sun. It is said Ornako, our leader at the time, had done something to anger the gods, and we were banished on Mysterio. They burned all of our rafts, and they sent Tristan's ancestors to punish us. Then Searling told of impending doom, and rescued my ancestors and put them here, on Linneaus. Neilso also put Tristan's kin here, and we have been fighting for centuries. Anyway, for some reason, Mysterio disappeared."

"It is given that we are descended from good, and Tristan, being supported by Neilso, is evil. It is also widely held that at one time, before we came to Xanthias even, that we had such powers as you. But these powers were taken from us when we were forced to live here by our Gods. It is only recently that we have learned to work metals. And yet, I have to sole remaining artifact from the olden days." Theseus rose and walked to his closet. "It is said Theseus the first wore this to clear the once hostile land. When he died, he took the secret of this with him. No one has been able to wear it since," he said as he pulled out a phosphorescent suit very similar to the battle armor worn during the moon riots of '43. Theseus brought the armor closer for me to

see. The suit's reflected light was highlighted in Theseus' envious eyes. I could see he was extremely proud of the outfit.

Theseus handed it to me, and I was amazed at how little it weighed. I examined it closely. There were no openings in the helmet, but a lot of strange things littered the torso and arms. The suit looked very functional, yet it was also very odd. There seemed no way to enter it. "Theseus, may I have my engineer look this over? We promise to be careful," I said sincerely.

"O. K., but don't damage it. It's the only thing from the old days any of us have."

"How long ago was this made?"

"I don't know, but Theseus the first was alive 10,000 Linneatian years ago," he said.

I was looking at an object 10,000 years old. One that was made by another civilization. One that was at least as technologically sophisticated as ours is today. Where are they now? Are the two T's the only remains of a once mighty civilization? Visions of "Chariots of the Gods" filled my mind. This Mysterio, could that be the asteroid field now? Who had moved them here, and why did they let their civilization decline to the point it is now? I did not have much time to contemplate my answer as I heard the sound of a prop plane in the distance get closer. Tearle had completed it sooner than I anticipated. Instinctively, I rushed to my trans, only to find it without fuel. I screamed in angst. Here I am, the only person on Linneaus who can do something about it and I'm grounded because of lack of fuel. Looking vainly upwards, I was reminded of those famous words spoken by Snoopy after his Sopwith Camel was shot down by the Red Baron. "Curse you, Red Baron," I quietly whispered.

CHAPTER FIFTY THREE

Tearle was a happy man. After all, he conquered most of the world. All that stood between him and total control lay beneath him. Calmly, he recorded the pictobytes of the battlefield. His years of military training told him the armies below were locked in a state of stalemate. The lack of opposition was evident even from his height. Good, he thought, I'll catch them sleeping. Confident of his success, he halted further reconnaissance and flew back to base. So confident was he of victory that he neglected to look at the reconn data he'd taken. It might prove to be a fateful mistake.

Later that night, Tearle ordered his troops to march towards the two capitals. It would be a moonwalk to take Tristan's city, as most of Tristan's forces were committed to Theseus' theater of operation. He timed the assault to arrive at each capitol two hours before sunrise, to catch everyone sleeping. As the night progressed, with the defenders oblivious to the attack, and Cheryl nowhere to be found, all was on schedule. Then a rare event occurred. It rained. The rivers swelled and overflowed their banks. Huge pluvial lakes appeared where only a parched flat field lay for months. The rain woke everyone in the Cathedralis and out on the battlefield. Both Tristan's and Theseus' armies were joyous. Now that they had a sustained rain, the fields could be planted soon. But the fields were in enemy held territory, and the mood quickly changed to depression in the Cathedralis. Both sides men wanted to leave to work the farms. I still had no idea where Cheryl was, and was becoming worried that she might be in danger from the floods. My worry was met by her joyfully returning from the mountains a while later, triumphant in her success.

"What'd you do, save the world?" I asked jokingly.

"I made the C.W.C. work, thats all," she said modestly.

I was surprised. We had worked three days straight before I had given up. "How?" was all I could ask.

"You worked out the principle yourself two days ago, I just couldn't remember exactly what it was, so I just input variables until it worked. Now there is a hurricane on the far side, and it's fragments are causing the rain."

I took a few seconds to analyze what she meant before responding. "How long will it last?"

"It should last a long time. You said that a hurricane likes to stay together. When we tried to get it to rain, we introduced a few squalls, one at a time. But they never lasted. I created six at once, and let the rotation pull them to the ocean side where they coalesced and fed a hurricane. You say a hurricane wants to stay together so even though it is fragmenting and sending showers our way, it also is building upon itself."

"But the showers that are here now will make it to the mountains. Then what will happen," I queried her.

"As these storms pass overhead and go to the mountains, most will be broken up. A few might survive to be whipped around and feed on the ocean. So what might happen is that two or more hurricanes could develop as time passes."

"Right, so because the system then becomes unstable, they'll all dissolve away, right?" I asked gaining an insight into her thinking.

"Yeah."

"Well, how long will it be before it stops raining?"

"I don't know, you're the expert, but I'll guess a day," she offered.

"Damn, you do good work," I commended her.

"I had a good teacher."

I looked at her ardently. "You know what rain does to me," I invited, arms outstretched. She closed the door and silked over to me, where we then made the bed.

"What shall we call her?" she asked remembering a conversation we had earlier regarding a baby. I simply smiled and we set about having a little girl this time.

CHAPTER FIFTY FOUR

While the rain was doing wonders for mine and Cheryl's love lives, it was hampering Tearle's military effort. Rivers and lakes formed where none had been only the day before. The whole ground turned to mud. And to top it off, his troops stopped and celebrated the rain. Needless to say, his offensive was stalled. By early evening, the rain let up and Tearle pushed his troops forward. He wanted to take the capitols two hours before sunrise the next day, otherwise it will be too late.

CHAPTER FIFTY FIVE

Late that night, while everyone else was asleep, I assembled our group for what I hoped will be the last planetbound meeting. When everyone was seated, I called the Congress to order.

"As your leader, it is my duty to inform you of any new details regarding our stay here. Not wanting to 'mine around a crater', we're going to be rescued sometime t.r.w," I waited for the response.

For a full five minutes, joyous activity erupted from everyone.

"We have survived a terrible ordeal whilst here on this planet. We survived the attack by Tristan's henchmen. We survived being likened to gods. We have survived the battle for the Cathedralis too," I summarized. "But there is yet one last battle we have to fight. Remember after the initial contact with 'his lord's' forces, we split into two groups - one commanded by me, the other by Tearle Durko. As you know, we lost contact with him shortly after our escape, and some of you thought his group might be deceased. And with the series of events here, we have had little opportunity to give them much thought. Well, I regret to tell you this was a big mistake on my part. While we were occupied here, Tearle and his group headed north and imposed themselves as leaders of the village. It appears he immediately set into play an armaments program."

Gasps of horror glistened in everyone's eyes.

"I have flown a reconn over his camp, and I am going to take this opportunity to share the pictos with you."

I dimmed the lights and projected the images onto a far stone wall. "As you can see, he has amassed a large army of about a million men. They are equipped with rifles and grenades. And, in this picto from a U.A.V. (unmanned aerial vehicle) taken yesterday, you can see several tanks near completion. However, you should note construction appears to have stopped on all of them." As I continued the lecture, I easily regressed to my professional role undertaken by me during the war of '50. A great sense of nostalgia surged in me. I have not felt this way since the war. I was in control.

"This next picto is very interesting," the image of Tearle's plane appeared on the wall. "That was taken two days ago. It is a non-standard prop plane. Some of the interesting things about it is it's wood construction, the size of the wings, the payload bay, presumably for a bomb, and most distressingly, this," and the image of the avionics suite was displayed. A few of the more knowledgable people gasped disparagingly. "For those of you who do not know what this

is, suffice it to say that this is the electronics that controls it. Without these controls this plane is unflyable. Some of you can tell what is unique about these avionics. They are E. M. P. hardened. E. M. P. stands for Electro -Magnetic - Pulse radiation. E. M. P. does not occur in nature, it's sole origin is manmade, and it results from the detonation of a thermonuclear device!" I slammed my fist hard onto the table for added effect. Boy, just like the old days, I stoically grinned to myself.

Of course, the reaction of the group was adamant. They all thought Tearle should be fried for building such a thing. Everyone knew nuclear weapons were basically outlawed in 2041.

Sensing control was slipping away, I quickly seized the initiative. "Hey, its O. K. That plane and it's payload is not meant for us... its meant for the rescuers. You see, by his plan, we'll all be dead by tomorrow, and he'll be in control of the planet when they establish orbit. He doesn't need that to force us, he can accomplish that with the rifles his army is equipped with. Today, probably around sunrise, he'll attack - yes, he's already surrounding us. There is no question in my mind that he can overwhelm the two T's forces. Unless we stop him, he will be in control of Linneaus by the time Louie arrives. Now how are we going to stop him?" I threw it open to debate.

Jack, our engineer, put forth the answer. "I believe I have the answer," he announced. "I've had the opportunity to dissect Theseus's armor, and I think I can duplicate it. I don't know that it will work, but at least it will look like it, and maybe we can bluff him into giving up."

"Jack, I looked at that suit. How do you even wear it, let alone use it?" I asked dispassionately.

"On visual examination it has a seamless entry system. They are activated by reading the correct index and thumb prints. By using the compulotor, acom, and pocom, I was able to query

it as to what the proper prints should be, and I made a facsimile." Jack pulled from his pocket a glove and put it on, then grabbed the luminescent suit and opened it. He stepped into it, and it sealed him in. A few moments later the helmet became translucent, and we could hear the breathing apparatus provide air for Jack. "This suit is a self contained spacesuit, but its made for an object with gravity but little atmosphere. I'd say it might have felt at home on an asteroid or small moon. Anyway, the imaging system is not unlike that in our trans'. I can see in holographic 3-D, near real time, real or false color images of you. I can move around like I'm floating on air. The suit gives one extraordinary strength," he demonstrated by lifting the solid oak-like table easily. There is also a weapons system, but I haven't got it to work yet," he admitted.

Nearly everyone was amazed that this relic worked, let alone as well as Jack described. Could the weapons work, can the suit be reproduced, how many, and who will get them, were questions answered eventually. The decision was made to replicate the suits. Now the decision on how to use them needed to be answered.

"I think there are some moral," man, I hated that word, "rather ethical questions that need to be addressed. The first is this - what will the natives think when they see us in these suits. Surely the 'gods' issue will be resurrected. And what about the battle itself? Are we condoning actually killing inhabitants of this planet, or are we to restrict ourselves to Tearle and his group? We have no right to kill anyone on this planet. But we do have jurisdiction over Tearle. They should be the only ones we deal with. Also, Louie will be here tomorrow night. What do you suppose his reaction will be when he sees us in these suits shooting up people left and right? As it now stands, our contamination pales in comparison to Tearle's, so we'll probably get off easy. If we kill any Linneatians we'll fry just as sure as Tearle will. I agree we should use them, lets just use some judgement first," and I concluded my argument.

"As far as being likened to 'gods'," rejected Jack, "I don't foresee that as a possibility. After all, 'gods' don't go around killing theirs or any people. And if Tearle is one us, look what he's done. No, I don't think that's an issue at all."

I concurred, and we put it to a vote. It was unanimous. We adjourned the meeting and Jack prepared to replicate the suits.

As the night progressed, Tearle and his army moved closer. Refreshed by the rain, the army made better time than expected. Tearle ordered the troops to rest for a while before continuing. Then, at precisely two hours before sunrise, he launched his assault.

CHAPTER FIFTY SIX

I was asleep when the attack came. I was awakened by the sound of gunfire in the distance. Cheryl and I quickly dressed and ran to Jack's quarters. There were three suits, enough for Jack, Cheryl, and me. We donned the suits with Jack's help, and frantically tried to familiarize ourselves with their operation.

"Well honey, do we have a chance?" asked Cheryl.

"There is always a chance, even if it is in the billions to one," I mocked an old T. V. star of sorts my grandfather idolized.

Just then, Theseus burst into the room. It was like a brick hit him, the sight of the three of us in suits like his. "How the Searling did you get all those suits?" he asked disbelieving.

"It's not important," I avoided the question knowing he could not fathom the explanation. "What is important is that you offer no resistance. This is our battle, and I don't want any of you hurt because of us."

"Your battle?" he was confused. "If it's your battle then its mine too - after all, you helped me in mine, I can help you in yours."

I was impressed by Theseus' sense of honor. I had taught him well. Or had it always been there before I arrived? I did not know. All that mattered to me was that no Linnaean dies because of us. "I am sorry Theseus, but I have to refuse your kind offer of help. I will explain later, but we must get going," and I addressed Cheryl and Jack. "O. K. Jack, it's your call," I offered.

"Lets fly," he proclaimed. He led the way through the maze of corridors that was the Cathedralis and exited near an observation tower. Looking at the battlefield, I was glad Tristan laid siege to us. It spared Theseus from the initial onslaught. While this was good for Theseus, it was bad news for Tristan's army. They bore the brunt of the battle. The casualties were great. Within 1/2 hour almost the entire army lay wounded, most mortally, medicine being the way it was. Tristan tried unsuccessfully to rally his troops. Desperation instead set in, so he ordered his knights to retreat to his now occupied capitol. Unfortunately, medieval warfare bunched things up, and one grenade took out all but one of his heralded knights. Seeing this, Tristan beat a hasty retreat to the moat separating him from Theseus.

"Please let me in," he asked fearful of what lay ahead.

I watched Theseus' reaction. He just smiled.

"Please Theseus, let me across, I beg you."

Still Theseus did nothing. The progress I had seen in him earlier seemed to fade. Maybe he just needed prodding, I thought.

"Why don't you let him across?"

"Why should I? He'd just as soon see me dead as I see him."

"But he's in trouble," I countered.

"So?"

"Remember you said you wanted to help? Well, you can do so by letting him across. It would be a great gesture on your part, and I'd be appreciative forever."

He continued to think about it as the marauders closed in on their target. "Let him cross," was the terse command Theseus let out.

"Thanks," and I patted him on the back.

"And when he gets across throw him in the dungeon," he rebuffed my arm.

Again my hope was dashed. Always it seems just as they make progress, they do something that spoils it.

It wasn't long before Tristan was across the moat. And just in time too, for Tearle's elite arrived at the opposite side and took shots at Tristan. Vainly, they tried to hit him, but Tearle designed them for close range. What a joke, I thought. It was like bringing a knife to a gunfight.

As Tristan was led to the dungeon, I could see his whole army disintegrate. They were quickly taken care of in mopping up operations. Surprisingly, I noticed a small column of men quietly melting away from the battlefield. And it was flying Tristan's colors. I wondered what brave person led the group.

The severity of the onslaught had caught Sir Cadmus off guard. He, like the rest of Lord Tristan's army were sleeping when the attack came. Quickly and professionally he urged his troops to a concealed position. There he waited and let the enemy pass him by. They carried strange weapons which made a lot of noise, and killed people by invisible means. But they could be killed too, and his men set up a killing zone, and they shot arrows at all who entered it. Then the call to knights was sounded, and Sir Cadmus started to the rallying point. He was about 1/3 of the way there when the assemblage was blown up by a grenade. So he returned to his position, and told his unit that the battle was lost. He seized the opportunity to save himself, and he quietly retreated to the woods. When he was secure in the knowledge that he was far from the

battle, he hoisted his colors and began the trek to the castle. Leadership would be his upon his arrival, he hoped.

CHAPTER FIFTY SEVEN

While Sir Cadmus thought he was doing something great, the rest of the knights thought he was a coward. But soon it did not matter what they thought, for they were now but a thought themselves. They had made the supreme sacrifice for their leader, they died.

The first phase went remarkably fast. In less than an hour, there was no resistance from Tristan's forces. Tearle quickly prepared for his second phase. He set up a large public address system, and he boomed surrender messages across the moat. To my surprise, Theseus did not waiver.

He walked defiantly to the edge of a wall and spit into the moat. I was impressed, but at the same time worried that he might do something foolish. Regardless of the carnage around him, he still might not grasp the force he was dealing with.

"Take it easy Theseus," I warned. "We don't want to make him blow his top," I cautioned knowing fully Tearle's potential.

"I'm not about to be pushed around," he retorted.

"This is our battle and that's final." It was the first time I gave him a direct order. The look in his eyes confirmed my mistake. Nevertheless, he acquiesced to my demands.

"Now is the time for us to find out if those suits work," I said as I led Cheryl and Jack to the bridge across the moat. "Tearle, this is Paul. I challenge you to a duel. Whoever wins gets the planet." It was a moot challenge, but I knew his ego would take it.

A duel? Tearle wanted to settle a few scores with me. He had been passed up for commander of the flight in favor of me. Then, when Jack turned down control over the group

and I took over, he resented it. Now he could get his revenge. "You're on," he replied gruntingly.

Slowly, we crossed the bridge and landed on the other side of the moat. Immediately, we were swarmed by his forces, whom laughed at us for falling into their hands.

"Kill them," was Tearle's simple command. The men aimed their guns at the three of us and fired. The projectiles were caught by the mesh of the suit, causing us no harm. Because these were natives, we took no action. I needed to get Tearle closer.

"Come on homo, you and me, one on one," I offered the greatest insult of the 21st Century - that of being a homosexual. He properly got angry and assembled his closest of the group around him. It was five against three, not the best odds, nor the best of times. Indiscriminately, they fired upon us, not caring for the natives which had captured us. A few of them were hit by the laser weapons directly, and a few more were injured by the reflection off our suits. Tearle was surprised, and he ordered his four to go hand to hand with us. Now was when the fun began. Here was four against three in hand to hand combat, sporting 21st Century battlearmor and three duplicated 10,000 year old relics. We easily overpowered them in our assisted powersuits. But in the melee, Tearle had disappeared. I had a hunch of where he went, but there was nothing I could do about it. Still, the rescuers were only an hour away, and Tearle's attempt to control the planet appeared stymied. That is until, suddenly, the roar of a prop plane announced the arrival of Tearle and his plane. This time he was playing for keeps, and one could tell the engine was struggling with it's massive load.

"Paul, I know you're listening," came his transmission. "Surrender immediately or else I'll fry everything for forty kilometers, and it will be all your fault!"

He was right, it would be. I could not allow the deaths of these people to be on my conscious. Reluctantly, I conferred with the rest of the group and received an unexpected answer - no! I radioed the news to him. He was adamant.

"Then you'll die," he screamed eerily as he began the arming preparations for his device.

CHAPTER FIFTY EIGHT

"Sir, we're within range of person to person communications with the planet. We're picking up something now."

Louie was elated. "Put them on the speakers," he ordered.

"...fry everything for forty kilometers, and it will be your fault!" came forth Tearle's angry voice.

All activities on the bridge ceased. The worst imagined scenario was overshadowed by reality. Louie could not believe his ears. While still in shock, my reply woke him up. Was Paul nuts? Why was he going to cause the death of others? What did Tearle have that can fry forty km ? No, it couldn't be, he hoped. "Zumbruge, put me in contact with Paul. I demand to talk to him."

"Absolutely," was the reply.

Not long after Tearle's plane left, my pocom announced an incoming call.

"Jaffrin," I acknowledged.

"Paul, I'm astonished. Did I hear him say what I thought I did?" asked Louie.

"Louie, is that you?" I asked not sure if it was a trick or not.

"You know damn well it is, now what the fuck is going on," he was furious.

"Well, per our earlier conversation, Tearle attacked the final outcropping of defense today. We are at the only place he has yet to control, and my guess is he'll blow it rather than

lose it. Lou, I think he has a nuke, he's hardened the plane, and it looks like it is capable of hauling one. I've got a trans, but no fuel. We're doomed without your intervention," I confessed.

"We're stabilizing our orbit now. How soon before he nukes the area?"

"He left a few minutes ago, I don't think it'll take long to arm it."

"We'll be stable shortly. Afterwards, we can intercept him."

"With what?"

"You know Al, we've got a few *Stillettos* just in case some- thing like this greeted us. We needed insurance in case any of you claimed to be 'gods' or something."

"Which, I must say, brings us to the issue of contamination. I think it's hopelessly tainted. We're going to have to work closely with these people from now on," I commented.

"We'll see about that later. I'll be down in a few minutes."

CHAPTER FIFTY NINE

Several minutes later we heard the dual thunderclap of Louie's P.O.L. *Eagle* exit the sound barrier. As he descended to land, he could see the carnage of the battlefield. Hardened by the war of '50, he was used to megadeaths. But here he could not bear the sight of another handless Linneatian. Louie felt saddened by what he saw. Once again, it seemed, Homo Sapiens had proven itself to be a violent species. This time, the stage was the universe, and the first contact with others showed the full range of wanton destruction humankind is capable of. Feelings of doubt surfaced in his mind about our ability to coexist in the universe without trying to impose our will on others as was done on Earth. As the founder of the United Earth Foundation, he too, was guilty of such a thing. But in the last few years he knew it was the right decision. Humanity needed to be united.

Spotting my fallen trans, he landed near it and slowly egressed. He looked really depressed. As I neared him, his blue eyes watered with the guilt that he as leader of humanity must hold. His eyebrows were tensed, and his constant smile was now a deep frown bordering on a pout. I could tell he was hurting inside, but I did not know what to say. I didn't have to say anything, as he spoke first.

"Paul, I'm going to kill Tearle if I have to ram his plane," he professed. He turned away before I could protest, and he climbed into his craft and powered it for flight. He quickly took off and began searching for Tearle's plane. A sense of relief swept over him as the nearly radar invisible wooden plane showed up on the scope. Using the IR imager, he zoomed in on the object and could see the ungainly bomb slung in the cargo bay. Without hesitation, he kicked in the S.R.B.s and the nearly twenty year old tav accelerated towards it's target. At a range of about twenty km, he let fly four missiles. Travelling at hypersonic speeds, the K.K.V.s (kinetic kill vehicles) rocketed towards their target. Quickly, the first missile guided itself through the wing, while simultaneously the second and third sliced through the cockpit and fuselage of the craft, impacting with the bomb. The rest of the plane, Tearle, and the last missile were atomized by the thermonuclear reaction that followed. It seemed the two rods created enough force to set up a chain reaction, causing initiation of fission. A huge spherical cloud of radioactive materials formed at the 15,000 meter flight path Tearle was on.

The burst took Louie by surprise. Desperately, he fought the Gs as he turned the craft 180 degrees away from the advancing E.M.P. Traveling as fast as they could in the planet's magnetic field, they overtook the craft, and the plane's avionics were temporarily overloaded with millions of gauss of electromagnetic radiation. Being built during the '30s, the *Eagle* was fortunately hardened. Registering the onslaught of the energy, the circuits protected themselves by disconnecting from the rest of the craft. Without computer control, the plane lost power and went into a stall. The G forces built up and Louie blacked out.

After registering the second pulse, the circuit breakers dutifully reached out and re-established links. After doing so, the "artificial intelligence" took stock of the situation. They found the tav in a lateral spin. They then asked the pilot subroutine to query the pilot as to whether this was desired or not. The subroutine replied the pilot was unconscious. According to program, the master routine took control and slowly brought the vehicle to level flight. Once stabilized, the medical routine administered the proper drugs to revive the pilot.

Groggy, Louie awoke to find himself flying away from the gargantuan cloud, and a few thousand meters below his previous level. "What happened?" he asked the cocom (cockpit computer).

"A nuclear airburst of 2.4 mt occurred, resultant E.M.P. caused the plane to protect itself. After precautions, plane brought to level and pilot revived," came the musical voice.

Louie surveyed the area, and little damage was done on the ground. He was relieved, for Tearle was gone without taking anyone else with him. Happily, he resumed course for the Cathedralis.

EPILOGUE

Cheryl, Joseph, and I linked our hands together in our backyard and looked upwards into the dark Linneatian sky. Scanning the sky, Cheryl eventually pinpointed the moving light against the background stars. "There honey, see it?"

"Yes," I nodded as I saw it quickly pass overhead. We waived goodbye. Goodbye to Louie and his rescuers, who had saved the world nearly 6 months ago. During the interim, he gathered all the remaining survivors - even Chloris, who was very, very, glad to be rescued. An argument broke out about what to do with the battered Linneatians. Eventually Louie agreed with Cheryl's proposal that we stay on and help Linneaus acclimate to the new ideas. Theseus even let Tristan go free to return to his devastated capitol. I helped Theseus establish a central government, to work out reconstruction of the north and to aid in advancing their society. The contamination issue was thus resolved by default. There simply was no alternative.

Cheryl had become pregnant, and we were hoping for a girl. As the ship went beyond the horizon, taking Louie and everyone else away, I reflected upon the promises and expectations that arose from our being here. Here was the chance to unify a world without the costly wars Earth experienced over centuries of trying. If only we had had such visitors during our civilization's growth, things might have been different with our first contact. But that being the case, I probably wouldn't be here, would I? I turned to my wife and looked at her carefully. My eyes focused on her bulging abdomen. To me, her pregnancy not only symbolized a newly developing Jaffrin, but it also signified the birth of a new society. As I lay my hand upon her womb, I felt the baby move. What new wonders lay ahead for us here, on Our home, Linneaus.